TIME BANDITS

TERRY GILLIAM REMIXED

BORDERLANDS

ELI ROTH TALKS CLAPTRAP

SFX

THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY

TIME'S UP FOR THE HARGREEVES CLAN

PLUS!

THE WALKING DEAD
RICHONNE REUNITED

STAR TREK: DISCOVERY
DESIGN IN THE 32ND CENTURY

IN A VIOLENT NATURE
A NEW TAKE ON SLASHER MOVIES

WE BRING SUTEKH'S GIFT OF...

DOCTOR WHO

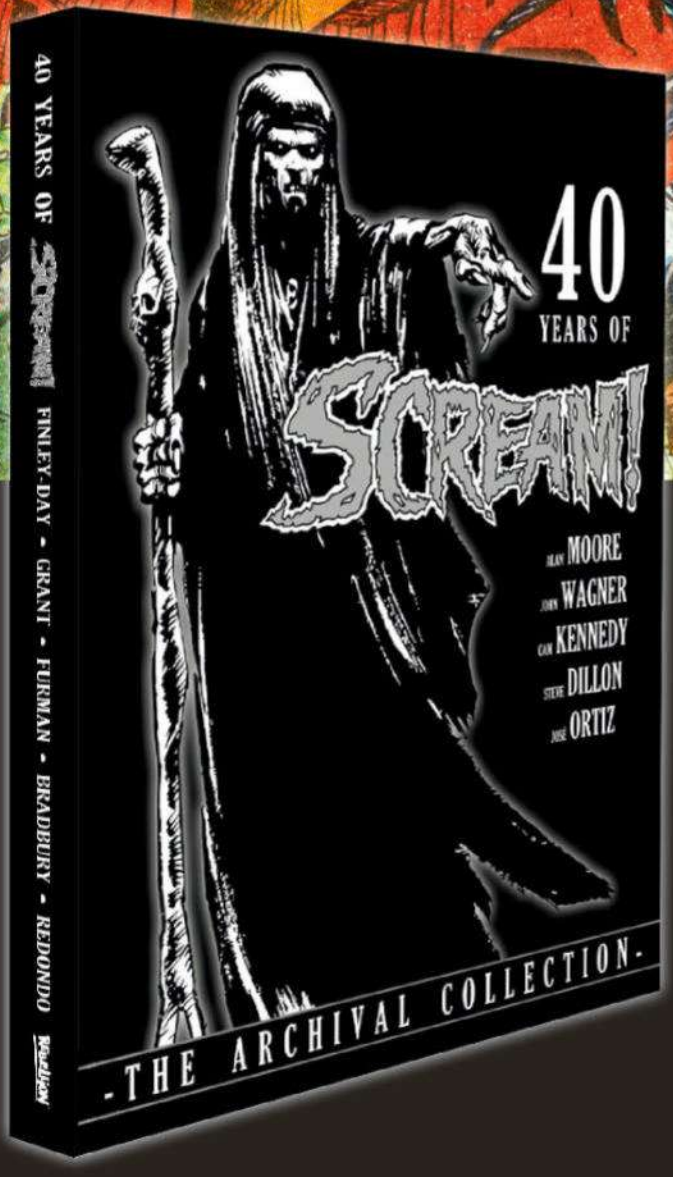
SECRETS OF SEASON ONE!

PLUS! MISTY / NEMESIS / FLASH GORDON / JESSICA JONES
DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE / KITE MAN / STINGRAY
SNOWPIERCER / FUTURAMA / BATMAN AND ROBIN!

FUTURE
ISSUE 381 AUGUST 2024
PRINTED IN THE UK

DEFINITELY

NOT FOR THE NERVOUS!



SCREAM!

-THE ARCHIVAL COLLECTION-

Celebrating forty years since IPC launched the UK's most iconic horror anthology, this single volume collects all the strips included in the fifteen-issue run of **Scream!**.

Produced 'from the depths' of King's Reach Tower by the mysterious undead editor Ghastly McNasty, the first issue of **Scream!** was unleashed on 24 March 1984. An immediate hit with fans, the comic featured strips plucked from the fevered imaginations of British comic-book legends such as **Alan Moore**, **John Wagner**, **Alan Grant**, **Simon Furman** and **Gerry Finley-Day**, all beautifully realised by artists including **Eric Bradbury**, **Cam Kennedy**, **José Ortiz**, **Ron Smith**, **Steve Dillon** and **Jesus Redondo**.

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24
38
50
54

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FEATURES

24 DOCTOR WHO
We bring Sutekh's gift of coverage to all humanity.

34 WILLIAM RUSSELL
A classic chat with the late *Doctor Who* legend.

38 THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY
It's farewell to the Hargreeves family in season four.

44 BORDERLANDS
Eli Roth's game adaptation has vaulting ambition.

50 TIME BANDITS
What sort of supreme being created such riffraff?

54 STAR TREK: DISCOVERY
Designing the final frontier of fashion.

64 THE WALKING DEAD: THE ONES WHO LIVE
Take a big, juicy bite out of the stars/producers.

44

RED ALERT

6 SNOWPIERCER
The train now boarding on season four...

8 NEMESIS: ROGUES' GALLERY
Mark Millar makes the bad seem good.

10 FUTURAMA
Good news, everyone... it's back! Again!

14 KITE MAN: HELL YEAH!
His own show? Did he pull some strings?

16 FLASH GORDON
Just a man, with a man's courage.

REVIEWS

72 A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE
Was the budget for this *hush* money? Our lips are sealed.

76 THE AGITATOR
Sacre Bleu-ray, it's Jean-Pierre Mocky!

82 DOCTOR WHO: SEASON ONE
Casting directors: Susan Twist is available for work now.

86 THE BOOK OF ELSEWHERE
China Miéville x Keanu Reeves. *Woah! Dudes!*

92 DEADPOOL
A comic book reboot for the foul-mouthed fella, ahead of his new film.

REGULARS

68 BROUGHT TO BOOK
China Miéville on his Keanu Reeves collab. It's totally *BRZRKR*.

85 THE WRITE STUFF
Deborah Harkness answers our author questionnaire.

96 BLASTERMIND
We mask the questions in our regular quiz.

98 TOTAL RECALL
We only have ice for *Batman & Robin*.

Captain's Log

We couldn't let the season finale of *Doctor Who* pass without one last – for now! – cover. It's been *quite* the journey, not only for everyone involved in re-launching the show, but for us at *SFX*. It takes a *lot* of work to get the kind of access we've been fortunate enough to bring you over the last year, and I hope you've enjoyed it. There's still going to be more *Who* bubbling away in the next few months as we head towards the Christmas special and season two! Judging from the influx of new readers I trust you'll enjoy our take on Britain's biggest sci-fi series. It's been *so* exciting to have one of the juggernauts of sci-fi back for a full season and to see your responses to our issues. Someone complained that there's (apparently) "already a magazine about *Doctor Who*", but that's never stopped us from writing about *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* or any other genre show...

Regardless, I've been saying for a while now that things are about to get stratospheric in the genre sphere, and the next few months at *SFX* are looking super exciting. And isn't that a lucky position to be in? To be back at a point where we'll have all those aforementioned fantastic shows – and films – in one magazine at the same time. What a dream! And where else would you get that in print every month? Nowhere! What a time to be alive!

Darren x

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Dark Universe looks absolutely incredible. I want to live there.
→ *The Boys* maintains a ridiculously high standard for a fourth season.
→ I've seen footage from *Alien: Romulus* and it might just be the best Xenomorph movie since the original sequel.
→ More tie-in releases from fictional characters please – loving the pop music from *Smile 2*'s Skye Riley.
→ Also on the horror front: loved *In A Violent Nature*, *Winnie-the-Pooh: Blood And Honey II* and *MaXXXine*. I'm currently really enjoying *Nightmares And Daydreams* on Netflix too.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Spoke to Cailee Spaeny about *Alien: Romulus*. She was wearing a The Clash t-shirt, and liked my Velvet Underground t-shirt. Then I interviewed her co-star David Jonsson, and he was jealous of my T Rex t-shirt. This is the sort of validation I've been waiting for ever since the advent of Zoom.
→ My *X-Files* rewatch hit "War Of The Coprophages". I love that episode so much – so many great lines. "This is no place for an entomologist!"
→ Intrigued by the next BFI Flipside title (out on 16 September): 1982's *The Outcasts*, written and directed by *Blood On Satan's Claw*'s Robert Wynne-Simmons.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ The *Life After* documentaries tread a fine line between wonderfully fascinating and thoroughly depressing. So obviously I can't wait for *Life After The Neverending Story*.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ Well, the *Shadow Of The Erdtree* DLC for *Elden Ring* certainly kicked my bottom, even with a level 140 character. And I'm not the only one, apparently. But the pain is worth it - the Shadow Realm looks *gorgeous*.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Revisiting Peter Davison's *Campion* on iPlayer. Easy to imagine it's the Fifth Doctor undercover in the 1930s. Still smiling at, "This is a gun. And once I've read the instruction leaflet I won't hesitate to use it..."
→ Loved *Kingdom Of The Planet Of The Apes*. But give us nuke-worshipping mutants, you cowards!

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ One of my favourite shows of the summer is Apple TV+'s *Sunny*. It's odd, entirely unexpected, and has a gloriously unhinged villain and one hell of a killer soundtrack.

RANTS

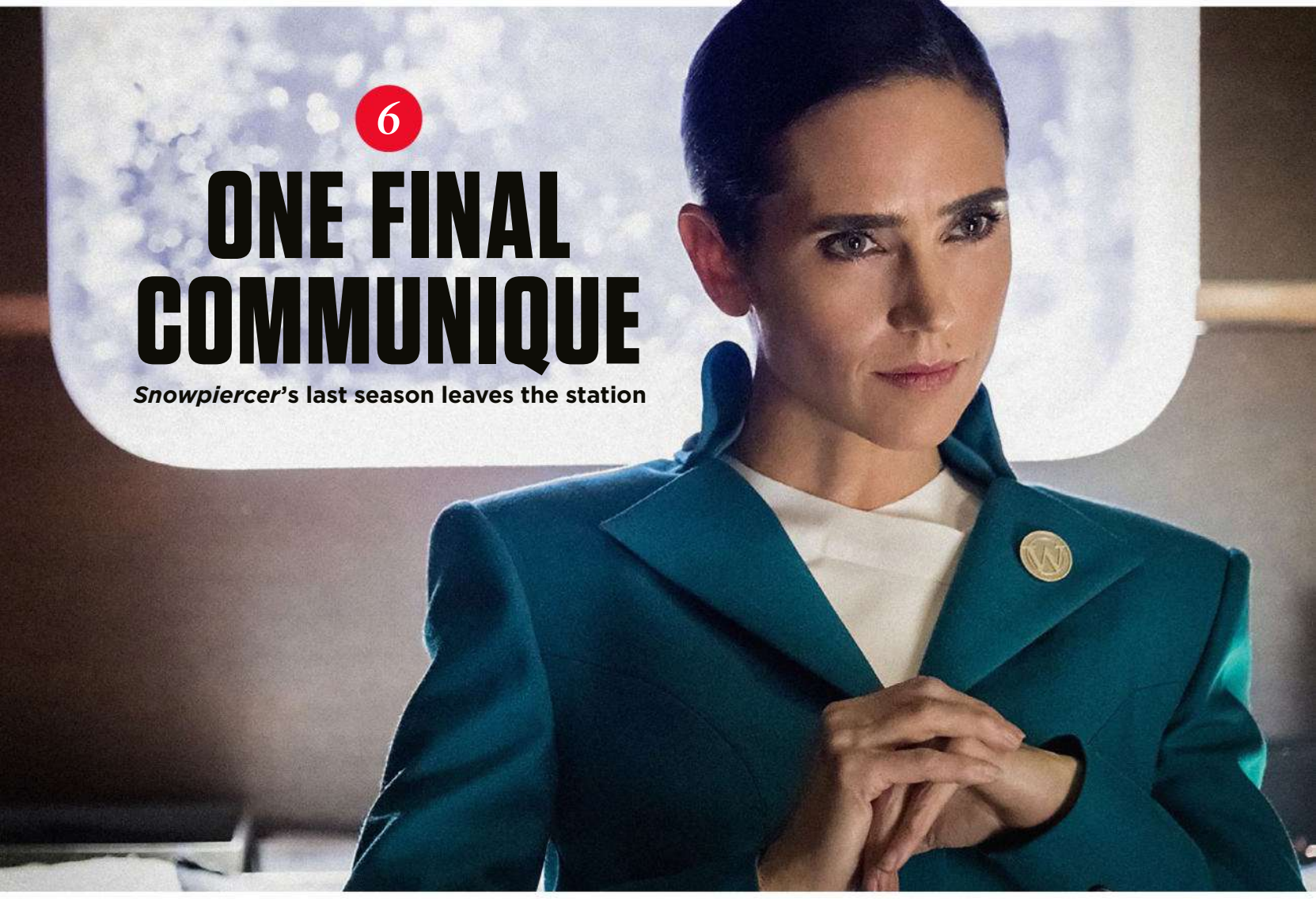
→ Can entitled, adult-baby *Star Wars* gatekeepers just disappear themselves forever? What a tedious group of people who need to touch grass.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

AUGUST 2024

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// SPOOKS!



6

ONE FINAL COMMUNIQUE

***Snowpiercer*'s last season leaves the station**

Highlights

8

NEMESIS

→ Mark Millar brings you a *Rogues' Gallery* of heroes and villains in a new crossover series.

14

KITE MAN

→ DC expands their animated adventures with a... sitcom set in a bar full of villains? Cheers!

18

DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE

→ Marvel's Mutants finally make their MCU debut. You know what we mean.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Getting Back On Track

Paul Zbyszewski explains how **Snowpiercer**'s final season made it through the wilderness WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Andre (Daveed Diggs) and Melanie (Jennifer Connelly).

Andre with Michael Aronov as Dr Nima Rousseau.

FANS OF THE *SNOWPIERCER* series have had to be a patient lot. The third season finale aired way back in 2022. While the fourth season finished production that same year, the show fell into television limbo when its home network TNT stopped airing original series. So an enthusiastic locomotive "toot-toot" goes to AMC for rescuing the final season of the post-apocalyptic drama so that audiences can get some closure.

Guiding the end of the series into the proverbial station is veteran sci-fi writer and executive producer Paul Zbyszewski, who accepted the task of figuring out the ultimate fate of the Snowpiercer and Big Alice train survivors.

He tells Red Alert that one of the first things he did as the new showrunner was sit down with exiting showrunners Graeme Manson and Aubrey Nealon. "They did a terrific job with the first three seasons, and I wanted to carry that torch for them and end it the right way to do them proud," he says.

A self-professed comics nerd and big fan of the original French *Le Transperceneige* graphic novels that inspired both the 2013 film and the TV show, Zbyszewski says he went back to that source text for thematic inspiration. "This season is not direct translations of [book] characters and stories, but there's a lot of homage to what came before in the graphic novels," he explains.

Zbyszewski says he was determined to make sure that every main cast member got their moment to shine – from Andre Layton (Daveed Diggs) and those on the Big Alice cars who found temperate land in the season finale, to Melanie Cavill (Jennifer Connelly) and her charges still riding the rails on Snowpiercer.

"I just saw this murderers' row of actors," he says of his ensemble. "It's a cast, top to bottom, of phenomenal, talented actors. The greatest challenge was, how do you feed them all and give them all good stuff? Sticking the landing on any show, and I've had to do it on a couple, is a really hard thing. You know from the outset you're not going to please everybody, so you have to just go back to your initial intentions of what would be best for these characters."

For Layton, his family and the other like-minded survivors, it's about remaking society again. "Coming into the New Eden side of the story, just out of respect for what came before, we wanted to

Sean Bean as Joseph Wilford is still alive, amazingly...

Bess (Mickey Sumner) with Bennett (Iddo Goldberg).

start the season saying all that hard work paid off.

"Regardless of the choices they made about separating, they earned this time together," he says of the burgeoning town. "Life is good and they form a society. We wanted the characters to enjoy the moment and to show different relationships and bonds and friendships, and to establish this sort of pioneer Western town."

On the Snowpiercer side with Melanie, Zbyszewski says he asked himself: what's the mystery? "How do we create something that has fans asking questions, and hopefully getting satisfying answers as the season unfolds? Part of that was introducing some new characters and we needed a little bit of exterior antagonism to shake things up. Somebody who's coming from a completely different space, a much more official space, and a much more governmental, authoritative space."

> **"Sticking the landing on any show, and I've had to do it on a couple, is a really hard thing"**

Formerly an exec on *Agents Of SHIELD*, Zbyszewski, asked its star Clark Gregg to board the train. "Writing something different for him, something that had some edge to it and was not like Agent Coulson at all, he was excited about it and I was excited about it," he adds.

Asked if viewers can expect some hope via character reunions or even being able to exist in the outside world again for good, Zbyszewski says he looked to the graphic novels, which always included a little bit of hope. "But what attracted me thematically was going back to the why of things," he offers.

"How did we get here and why? Hitting the themes of not just 'don't mess with Mother Nature', but how power corrupts, and how pride and ego factor into man's unchecked hubris to cause incredible damage to the environment.

"There's a lot of those themes that permeate throughout the entire season, and the decisions that characters make along the way," he continues. "It's little things based on decisions made by individuals that can affect so many. Then pulling back the layers of, why did you make that decision? There are a lot of twists and turns in the season and a lot of big reveals, but that will all dial back to decisions and consequences, and those decisions coming from emotional places."

Snowpiercer is on AMC and AMC+ from 21 July in the US. UK details are TBC.

SCI-FACT! **During filming, new cast member Clark Gregg managed to find time to bust some cool dance moves... (see bit.ly/clarktiktok).**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Second Coming

It's a new dawn for Millarworld as **Nemesis** and **Prodigy** return at Dark Horse Comics WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Cover art for *Night Club II*, by Juanan Ramirez.

AFTER BRINGING ALL OF HIS many characters together in last year's *Big Game*, Mark Millar is now entering a new era after shifting Millarworld to Dark Horse Comics, beginning with *Nemesis: Rogues' Gallery* and continuing in *Prodigy: Slaves Of Mars*, whose central protagonists are like flipsides of the same scarred coin.

"Nemesis is like Batman and Prodigy is like Bruce Wayne," says Millar of evil super-criminal Matthew Anderson and genius adventurer Edison Crane respectively. "And I've often said Prodigy is like Batman without a costume."

The second in a trilogy of new series, the title of the Valerio Giangiordano-illustrated *Rogues' Gallery* evokes the Dark Knight or Flash's classic pantheon of adversaries, although Nemesis himself is the biggest supervillain of them all. "Nemesis has always owed a lot to DC and *Nemesis: Reloaded* was essentially a Batman-type character coming up against a Commissioner Gordon-type

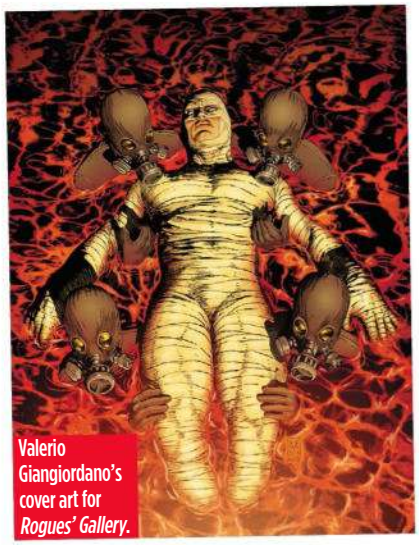
> "Nemesis is like Batman and Prodigy is like Bruce Wayne"

character," says Millar of the five-parter's predecessor. "With this series, I thought it would be a lot of fun to have a bunch of really good people who'd been wronged by Nemesis coming together as his rogues, his baddies.

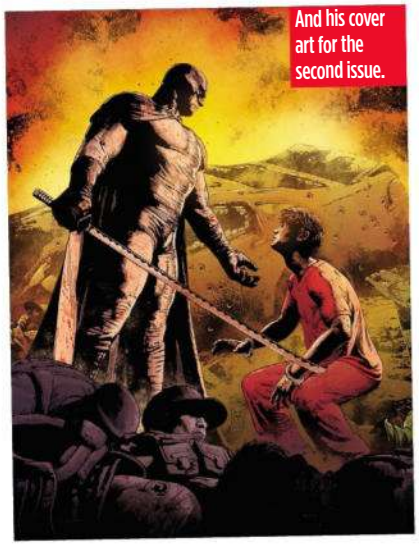
"With Batman or the Flash, it's like a good guy against a group of bad guys, but I liked the idea of a bunch of good guys getting together because perhaps their wife or their children had been killed by Nemesis."

Millar is also introducing Nemesis's answer to Robin. "I liked the idea of having a sidekick," he adds. "So this story involves that too as it really delves into those classic tropes. Then in the next series, you meet the women and Nemesis's equivalent of Selina Kyle or Irene Adler, who is going to be his undoing."

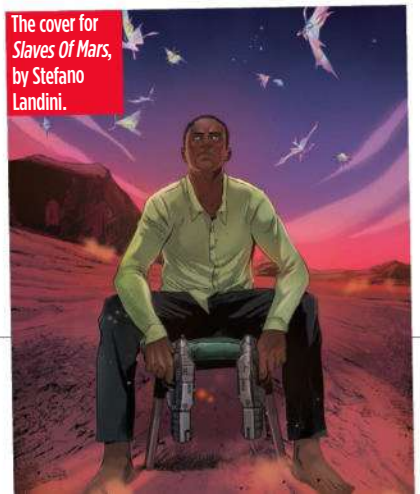
With Edison and his brother uniting to investigate their father's disappearance, the Stefano Landini-drawn *Prodigy: Slaves Of Mars* also owes a debt to Sherlock Holmes: specifically the famous detective's spymaster elder sibling. "Mycroft is actually smarter than Sherlock, and I've loved him ever since I saw Billy Wilder's *The Private Life Of Sherlock Holmes*," says Millar. "So there's this idea that if Edison and his brother are both special guys then their father must have been something pretty incredible as well. Their dad was working on America's secret Mars programme and now he's gone missing and is apparently dead..."



Valerio Giangiordano's cover art for *Rogues' Gallery*.



And his cover art for the second issue.



The cover for *Slaves Of Mars*, by Stefano Landini.

Delving into the USA's clandestine history, the five-issue series ties into the covert conspiracy that was at the heart of both *Nemesis: Reloaded* and *Big Game*. "It might be an age thing but I love all that stuff!" adds Millar. "It's like how Jack Kirby in the '70s was really getting into all this ancient astronaut stuff with what he was doing on his Marvel series like *The Eternals*. It's been a source of fascination for me for a while now, as all my stories seem on some level to be about uncovering the secrets of the world."

DOCTOR, DOCTOR

Millar believes that Prodigy's wide range of genre-busting possible storylines has much in common with a certain Time Lord. "I always thought the Doctor was a brilliant character in the sense that his stories could be set in any time zone or any place in the universe," he elaborates.

"So if you're playing with that canvas and you can't think of a story for *Doctor Who* then you must be doing something wrong, because the story is literally infinite. It's the same with Edison as well because he's super-smart and he's into everything, so I could do an occult story or sci-fi or an Indiana Jones-type adventure."

With the fifth volume of *The Magic Order* and the final instalment of *Jupiter's Legacy* both due later this year, Millar is also re-teaming with artist Juanan Ramirez on *Night Club II*, which sees the return of their trio of bloodsucking teenage superheroes. "At first, it's just the original three kids but then one of their girlfriends is like, 'I want to be one too' and then she leaves them and has a new boyfriend, and then somebody who's best pals with them is jealous so it's like, 'Okay, we'll bite you too...' Pretty soon, it's spread around the school and you've got this real problem!"

Nemesis: Rogues' Gallery is out on 24 July, Prodigy: Slaves Of Mars is out on 7 August, and Night Club II is out on 21 August.

Alternative cover art for *Rogues' Gallery*, by Jae Lee.

SCI-FACT! **With 1939 Superman entering public domain in 2034, Millar is planning to publish his own stories.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Yann Demange the latest director to bail on Marvel's seemingly vampirically-cursed **Blade** movie.
→ Robert Pattinson starring in remake of cult 1981 horror **Possession**.
→ *Star Trek: Picard*'s Terry Matalas set to write a new version of **Enemy Mine**.
→ **The Hunger Games: Sunrise On The Reaping** targeting a 20 November 2026 release.
→ *Deadpool & Wolverine*'s Shawn Levy in talks to direct **Avengers 5**.
→ Emily Blunt in the frame for Steven Spielberg's UFO movie, set for release 15 May 2026.
→ Jake Gyllenhaal joining the cast of sister Maggie's *Frankenstein* tale **The Bride!**
→ Mikaela Hoover to play Cat Grant in James Gunn's **Superman**.
→ Chris Hemsworth to lead the *Transformers* and *GI Joe* crossover movie.
→ Elle Fanning linked to **The Badlands**, the next *Predator* film.
→ Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman potentially reuniting on a **Practical Magic** sequel.

ARNOLD JEROCKI/GETTY

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Future Shock

Futurama's David X Cohen talks about what's in store for the show's ninth season WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

WHEN *FUTURAMA* WAS resurrected for a third time in July of last year, critics and fans alike wondered if the fact that the Planet Express crew had been in mothballs for a decade would diminish the potency of the show's wit. But the 10 new episodes of season eight didn't skip a beat, skewering everything from Bitcoin to vaccine controversies.

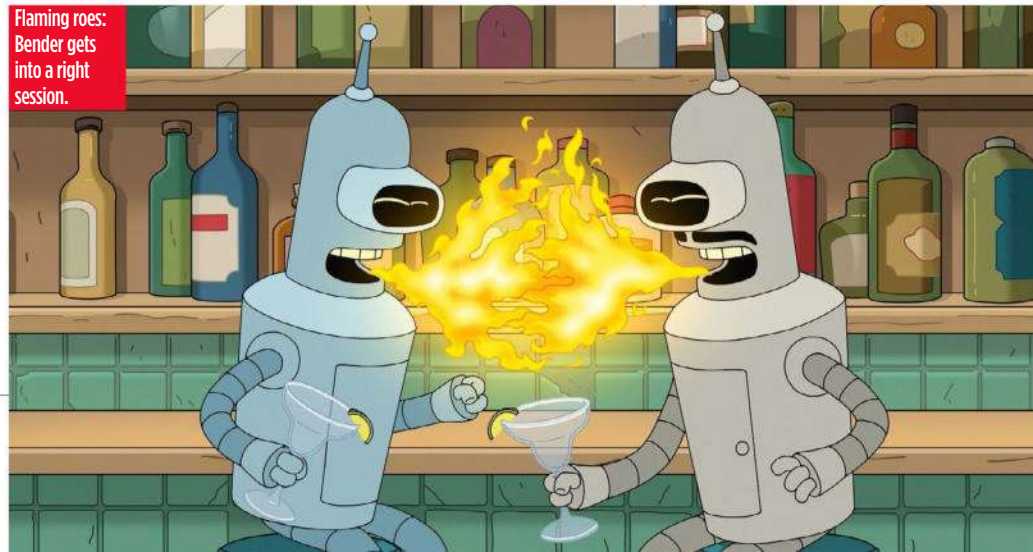
Executive producer Matt Groening and showrunner David X Cohen were able to confidently throw a Bender-like rude gesture at the sceptical, because their return did so well that *Futurama* got picked up for another two seasons, ensuring its future through to 2026.

Season eight returns at the end of July with 10 episodes that continue to send Dr Farnsworth's (Billy West) Planet Express delivery crew around the galaxy in their usually ineffectual way. At the helm from the very beginning, Cohen tells Red Alert that in their 25 years of making the show together, the society of the day has never failed to provide them with ridiculous topics to parody through the lens of the 31st century. "One great thing about writing about the future is that it generates itself while you're off the air, which we often are," he laughs.

"Last season, there were even some things that we couldn't have done before because we had accidentally set them up 20 years ago," he says, referring in particular to "Children Of A Lesser Bog", the episode about Amy (Lauren Tom) and Kif's (Maurice LaMarche) tadpoles spawning. "The furious rate of change in real life has given us some new material."

Teasing what's coming in this collection, Cohen says there will be an AI-related episode where Leela (Katey Sagal) will make a new friend who turns out to be a chatbot that is very jealous of real people. "We just managed to get that in before all hell broke loose in the real world," he jokes about the current public turn against AI (one reason why their writers went on strike last year).

"We have a fast-fashion episode about the price we may pay in the future for our disposable clothing that we're now wearing," he says of the episode "Attack Of The Clothes", which features the voice of model/actress Cara


Flaming roes: Bender gets into a right session.

TM & © 2024 20TH TELEVISION/MATT GROENING

Won't somebody think of the children?

Fry and Leela go full-on *Mission Impossible*.

IT departments haven't changed much over the years.

> **We're still finding some things to comment on that we haven't hit yet in 160 episodes**

Delevingne. "She came in to play her head, which gets attached to a Frankenstein's monster-like creature that the Professor creates. The unexpected direction that one goes in is that it's very hard to find clothing for this misshapen creature. So the Professor has to create this specialised clothing, and that becomes a hit.

"To me, it's like a classic *Futurama* episode with subject matter we've never touched before. We're still finding some things to comment on that we haven't hit yet in the first 160 episodes."

Cohen says that the now romantic relationship between Fry (Billy West) and Leela will also continue to hit milestones. "We feel like the fans have responded more than we might have expected originally to Fry and Leela's relationship," he explains. "We did an episode I was happy with last year where they moved in together. We're sticking with that so Leela, Fry and Bender (John DiMaggio) are all roommates now."

He says one his favourites of this season is the high concept episode, "The Futurama Mystery Liberry", which sees *Futurama* reimagined as three children's mysteries in totally different styles. "There's one that's sort of like *Nancy Drew/The Hardy Boys*," he explains. "Each one takes extremely scientific twists along the way, one of which gets explained by Neil deGrasse Tyson."

Perhaps the most *Futurama* thing about the season is that Cohen and his writers had to write another series finale, because at the time, they didn't know if they would get more than the return order of two seasons.

Cohen says this one was particularly challenging because of how good 2013's "Meanwhile" turned out to be. "Everybody seemed pretty happy with it and it was very touching. I loved it," he emphasises. "But it left many open questions, including some we had to roughly deal with when the show came back, [regarding] the time resets. What did they remember? What did they not remember?" he says of the time slips experienced by the characters in "The Impossible Stream".

But those questions get answered in the ninth season finale, "Otherwise". Cohen says that in it, Fry will have a near lethal attack of déjà vu. "He starts to remember things that he shouldn't be remembering because time is sort of collapsing in on itself with the loops they've been through," he says. "So this one does tie into some events of the last series finale."

Futurama is on Hulu in the US and Disney+ in the UK from 29 July.

SCI-FACT! **Cara Delevingne previously voiced a makeup robot on the set of robot soap opera *All My Circuits*, in "The Impossible Stream".**

SCI-FACT! **Created by Pat Mills, *Misty* ran for 101 issues between February 1978 and January 1980, before merging with *Tammy*.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Ghoul Power

Gail Simone brings some modern-day horror to Rebellion's latest **Misty** Special

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WELCOME, THIRSTY FRIENDS, TO THE MOST DISMAL, FILTHY, AND INHOSPITABLE INN TO EVER POUR A PINT. ONCE, THIS WAS A HAPPY, COMMUNAL PLACE, FULL OF SONG AND LAUGHTER. NOW, SAD, DREARY GREY MEN COME FOR TWO REASONS AND TWO REASONS ONLY... ONE IS TO DRINK. FAIR ENOUGH. THE OTHER IS TO OGLE THE BEAUTIFUL GIRLS WHO WORK AT...
"THE PUB AT THE END OF THE ROAD"
AND HERE'S THE ESTABLISHMENT ITSELF. NOT EXACTLY WELCOMING, IS IT?
BEERS
WINES
THE SMELL OF SWEAT AND SMOKE AND STALE PIES PERMEATES THE VERY WALLS OF IT.
THE BLOODY TOAD
HOPE IS A STRANGER HERE.
AND HERE'S THE LORD OF THE MANOR, SUCH AS IT IS.
MY FRIENDS, MEET ABNER GRUDD.
FOOD MENU
WARNING, YOU NEVER QUITE GET USED TO THE SMELL.
THE BLOODY BOG'S BROKEN AGAIN! WHERE'S THAT UGLY SOW DAUGHTER OF MINE?

GROWING UP IN "THE BOONIES of Oregon", Gail Simone was fascinated by comics from around the world, but it wasn't until later in life that she discovered classic 1970s British girls' weekly *Misty*, which she describes as "like catnip to me due to my love of gothic horror". Now the *Uncanny X-Men* writer is scripting three quarters of this month's new *Misty Special*, which shines a new light on its enigmatic eponymous host.

"One of the interesting things about the original *Misty* is that there wasn't much information about Misty herself," Simone tells Red Alert. "In my three stories, we get a little bit of a glimpse into her, and why only she can tell these tales. It's some of the most fun I've had in comics."

Illustrated respectively by Carola Borelli, Aly Fell and Marianna Ignazzi, "Eleven Lonely Deaths" centres upon "a true crime podcaster returning to a killing zone at a beautiful countryside lake", "At The Pub At The End Of The Road" highlights sexual impropriety at "the worst pub in the UK", and "Happy Birthday, Mr Parker" takes place in "a lonely hospital with a secret", adding a contemporary edge to *Misty*'s formula.

"It's impossible to deny that the scope of stories that can be told with female leads has opened up quite a bit, but I also love a little bit of that feeling of a throwback time," says Simone. "If I'm writing a gothic horror story, I want it to have that proper vibe, that slightly-below-the-surface chilling tone that the best of those stories always captured. Above all, a ripping yarn is always the goal. Our stories take place across several decades, and if we get to do more the variety will surprise the readers, I think!"

"I wanted to give Gail's story a convincing '70s feel to the art and the atmosphere, as it recalled the era beautifully," adds Aly Fell, whose crowdfunded 2022 book *A Trick Of The Light* paid homage to *Misty*. "I grew up with comics from that decade and was able to refer to my own collection, but researching all the background paraphernalia such as the furniture and wallpaper was as much fun as designing characters. David Cassidy haircuts, kipper ties, Ford Anglia vans, smoky brown pubs... all go towards creating a believable world."

Written and drawn by Letty Wilson, "The Cracked Glass" includes queer themes and body horror, challenging how sometimes unhealthy views of beauty can affect your self-image. "I wanted to push that a little further and do a story about the horror of something that appears to be you, but isn't you," says Wilson. "Something that people accept as you even when you know it's wrong and unnatural, which is an uncanny doubling of identity that a lot of queer and neurodivergent people feel keenly, myself included. It's why horror involving mirrors has always been very scary to me, so I was keen to have a go at my own version."

Cover art by Tula Lotay. Eek!

The Misty 2024 Special is out on 17 July.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Fishy Business

Anderson Entertainment celebrates **Stingray**'s 60th birthday with multimedia event Deadly Uprising

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

THE SIXTIETH anniversary of *Stingray* (first broadcast in October 1964) is being commemorated by Anderson Entertainment with a multi-platform event encompassing prose fiction, audio dramas, comic books and a symphonic concert.

"The narrative has been developed to cover a variety of mediums and we hope that the different ways to enjoy the story will mean that there's something for everyone," says range editor Andrew Clements.

"The synergy is definitely there, but we're essentially dealing with about a dozen individual stories, each of which makes full use of its chosen medium, whether they're richly detailed passages in a novella, brilliantly vivid panels in the comics or even a slightly lighter tone of complicity with the audience at the live performance."

Beginning with the live *Deadly Concerto*, Deadly Uprising continues in Chris Dale's novella, *The Titanican Stratagem*. "*Stratagem* more fully re-establishes the world of *Stingray* including all the major players on both sides of the conflict – plus some minor ones only diehard fans will recall," says Dale. "While the central story is an old-fashioned standalone *Stingray* adventure, events are set in motion that will reverberate throughout the remainder of the overall narrative."

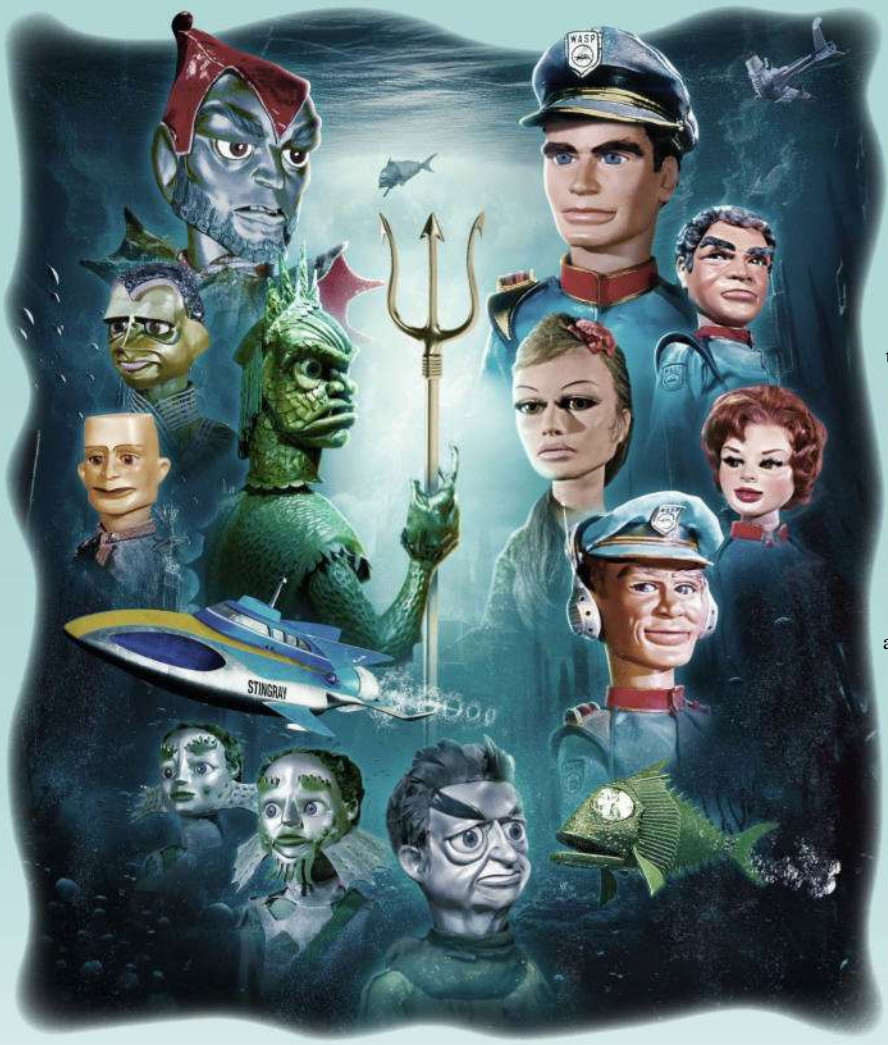
It also features the first appearance of Marineville's new head of security, Lieutenant Sara Coral. "Much of her backstory and personality are established in *Stratagem*, including her introduction and relationships with each member of the Marineville team," continues Dale. "It's been great fun creating a new character and throwing her into the wonderful world of *Stingray*, while also trying to make her feel authentic to the series and the era in which it was made."

With Clements saying "we all felt she was rather poorly served in a few of the later episodes and original comics," mute Pacifician Marina plays a significant role in Deadly Uprising. "We've done our best to give her some great memorable moments. There's an epic moment where she gets her hands on a sack of explosives..."

Evil King Titan is a more formidable foe in this iteration. "After countless defeats at the hands of the Stingray crew, he has had enough and begins to assemble the greatest alliance of undersea villains there has ever been," says Clements.

"This presents quite a problem for the World Aquanaut Security Patrol, who find themselves outnumbered and outgunned. They're on the backfoot for a lot of our narrative. The WASPs must use every trick in the book to save themselves and the rest of the world from destruction."

Due for release in August, Tales From The Depths – the first of two comic anthologies – combines classic strips from *TV Century 21* with new stories from the likes of Ian Edginton, James Swallow and Lee Sullivan. "The new stories will be interspersed with the '60s originals, but they're not going to be tied together," explains Clements. "Each of the two anthologies features a wealth of vintage strips along with five new stories."



Stingray: The Titanican Stratagem is out in August and Comic Anthology Volume One: Tales From The Depths is out in September. Deadly Concerto will be performed as part of the Stand By For Action 2 concert at Birmingham Symphony Hall on 12 July.

SCI-FACT! **Deadly Uprising continues in novella *Project Orca* in October and *Comic Anthology Volume Two: Battle Lines* in November.**

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Kite Man opines at length to Golden Glider.

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

The Airborne Identity

The aerial asshat flies solo in **Kite Man: Hell Yeah!**

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"Smell the foot, dammit! SMELL. THE. FOOT."

SOMETIMES YOU WANT to go where everybody knows your name – even if that name provokes nothing but titters, smirks and eye-rolls.

"What we really wanted to do was *Cheers* with villains," says Dean Lorey, executive producer of *Kite Man: Hell Yeah!*, the new animated comedy series that puts Gotham City's doofiest public menace front and centre after his show-stealing appearances in *Harley Quinn*.

"That was the concept, because it was something a little different from *Harley* while still being in the same universe. So we find him wanting to buy and run a bar. It just creates a safe space for villains, because no one wants them around. That's where we meet him."

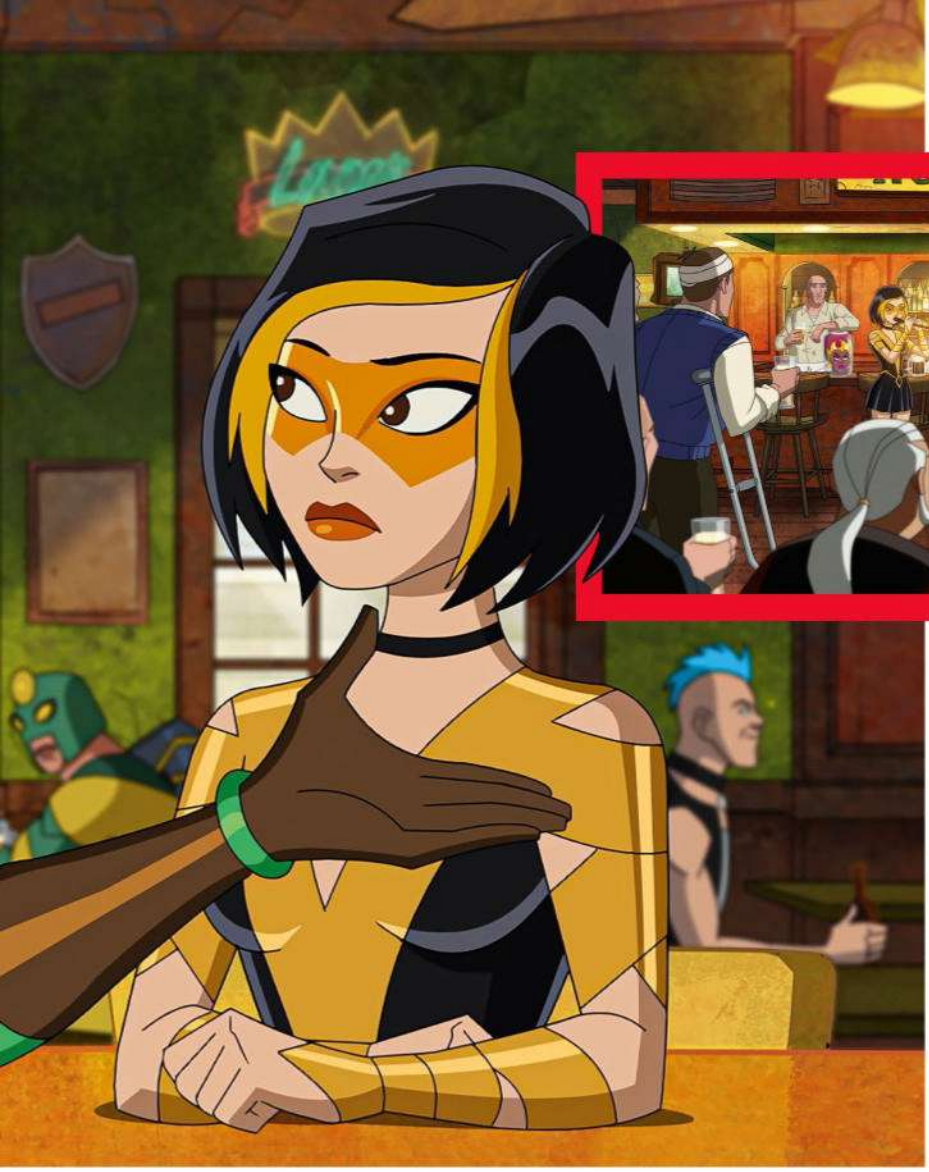
An obscure Silver Age Batman foe, Kite Man emerged as the breakout character of *Harley Quinn*, reimagined as a dim-witted but decent-hearted jock whose aeronautical schtick is played strictly for laughs.

"He was originally a one-off," says Lorey, who also served as writer and producer on *Harley Quinn*. "We'd written him for [voice actor] Matt Oberg. He was great and we just kept writing for him. We were surprised by how much people ended up loving that character. He sort of snuck up on us, too.

"He's endlessly optimistic. He has no reason in the world to be optimistic, or even proud of himself, but he is, and there's something that's charming about that. We just found him fun to be around. We wanted to explore what it was like for a guy with no powers to try and flourish in a world with people with a ton of powers. We also wanted to see him in a relationship, outside of his relationship with Poison Ivy. So now his girlfriend is Golden Glider, and she's got awesome powers, just like Ivy did. We really like them as a couple. It's sort of an aspirational relationship, as odd as it is."

The gang are ready to... rumble? Possibly.

As Kite-Man steps up to headline his own show the writers are gleefully putting the squeeze on this eternal D-lister. "He's the same guy. He still quotes Borat. He's very cheerful. But we do go more in depth with him whereas before, in *Harley*, he was a little bit more comic relief, although he had dramatic moments. But now we really challenge him. We put him up against some of the most vicious villains in the DC universe, and we have a lot of fun imagining what he can possibly do to deal with it. So that allows us to test him – and we enjoy that part of it!



Oh god no, not folk night... someone save them.

Duffman's gone off the rails, it looks like.

"His dream is to be accepted into the Legion of Doom. They need some flying villains to help out with a problem, an attack that's imminent, so he gets his opportunity. In the pilot it's a big day for Kite Man. He's buying a bar and hopefully finding his way into the Legion."

As Lorey tells Red Alert, the series is also a showcase for Oberg. "We knew he could shoulder an entire series as a lead, because we know him as an actor and how good he is. We felt he would be able to accomplish anything we threw at him. And he did. We imagined everybody would be saying, 'What could a series about Kite Man possibly be? What does that even look like?'

"So a lot of the fun of it was figuring out how we can take a character with no real abilities but a lot of optimism and just throw everything at this guy and see how he rises and falls, and how he defines himself, and Matt always rose to the challenge."

> **"He's the same guy. He still quotes Borat. He's cheerful"**

As well as mixing with such high-level threats as Lex Luthor and Bane, Kite Man also finds himself sharing screen time with Darkseid, the almightiest menace in the entire DC pantheon. Given that the show trades in near-the-knuckle gags and merciless spoofery, does Lorey ever feel like he's being vaguely sacrilegious, playing with such legendary icons?

"Sometimes," he laughs. "But I will say this. We try to respect the core of all of the characters, and just look for one funny twist or element about them. We write the shows as drama, as odd as that seems. We take their emotional lives really seriously. We take the relationships seriously.

"The thing that I most enjoy is taking these giant characters that are apex villains and getting into the minutiae of their daily lives. Like, what do they talk about at the Legion of Doom while they're having coffee? Why is Bane upset because he can't get an executive chair like everybody else?

"Whenever we take them outside of where you've typically seen them, that's the most fun stuff for me."

Kite Man: Hell Yeah! is on Max in the US from July. UK details are TBC.

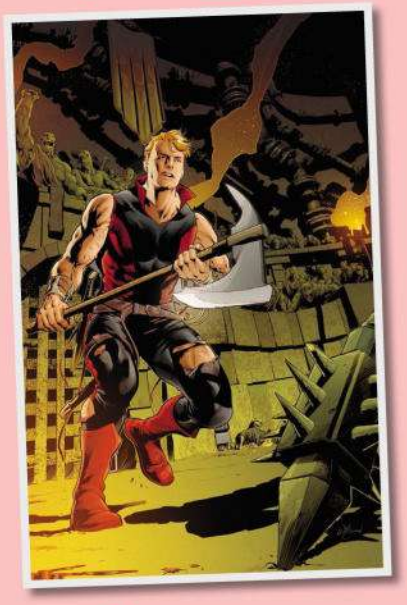
SCI-FACT! **Noonan's Bar first appeared in *The Demon Annual Vol 3* issue two, back in November 1993.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

DOMINIK BINDL/GETTY

- Holly Hunter joining **Star Trek: Starfleet Academy** with Paul Giamatti also onboard as the show's Big Bad.
- Giamatti's also set to star in a TV series based on the **Hostel** franchise.
- Universal developing **1313**, a new *Munsters* reboot with James Wan as executive producer.
- The Anne Rice TV universe expands with **The Talamasca**.
- **House Of The Dragon** renewed for a third season with fellow *Thrones* spin-off *10,000 Ships* back on.
- Zack Snyder's Norse mythology animated series **Twilight Of The Gods** hits Netflix 19 September.
- New **Ghostbusters** cartoon on the way from Sony Pictures Animation.
- **The Boys** set to end after its fifth season.
- Timothy Olyphant to voice the Terminator in anime series **Terminator Zero**.
- DC Studios developing a **Blue Beetle** cartoon.
- Netflix abandoning plans for a live-action **Power Rangers**.
- **My Adventures With Superman** renewed for a third season.

SCI-FACT! Flash Gordon was created in response to Buck Rogers after King Features Syndicate couldn't get the rights to John Carter of Mars.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Hallo (Again) Spaceboy

Gordon's alive! Mad Cave celebrates **Flash Gordon**'s 90th anniversary with brand new comic books

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

FIRST PUBLISHED BY KING Features Syndicate in 1934, *Flash Gordon*'s appeal has proved to be truly timeless, with the character appearing not only in Alex Raymond and Don Moore's long-running newspaper strip but also radio serials, television shows, films and comic books over the past 90 years.

"Flash is timeless because there is a clear cut 'hero-ness' about him as he is literally trying to save the universe!" says writer Jeremy Adams, who is teaming up with artist Will Conrad on the space hero's latest monthly comic series for Mad Cave Studios. "Where does that morality and gung-ho personality come from? That's something we can explore in the book."

After the recent Free Comic Book Day issue 0 concluded in devastating fashion with Ming the Merciless's home planet of Mongo apparently being destroyed, it's fair to say that there still isn't any love lost between Flash and the tyrannical alien emperor. "Flash needs to consider his actions but he was also saving his world," continues Adams. "The moral grey is a hard place to be, and when we discover the state of the universe, you better believe there's going to be a lot of self-reflection."

Issue one opens with Flash breaking out of a secret prison planet after learning that his lover Dale Arden is the subject of an assassination plot, but Adams declines to reveal who else we can expect to see. "I feel like that would spoil things, but familiar faces will arrive in time," he teases. "Right now I want to concentrate on Flash and Ming and from there, we'll reintroduce characters along the way, but maybe not in the way you might think!"

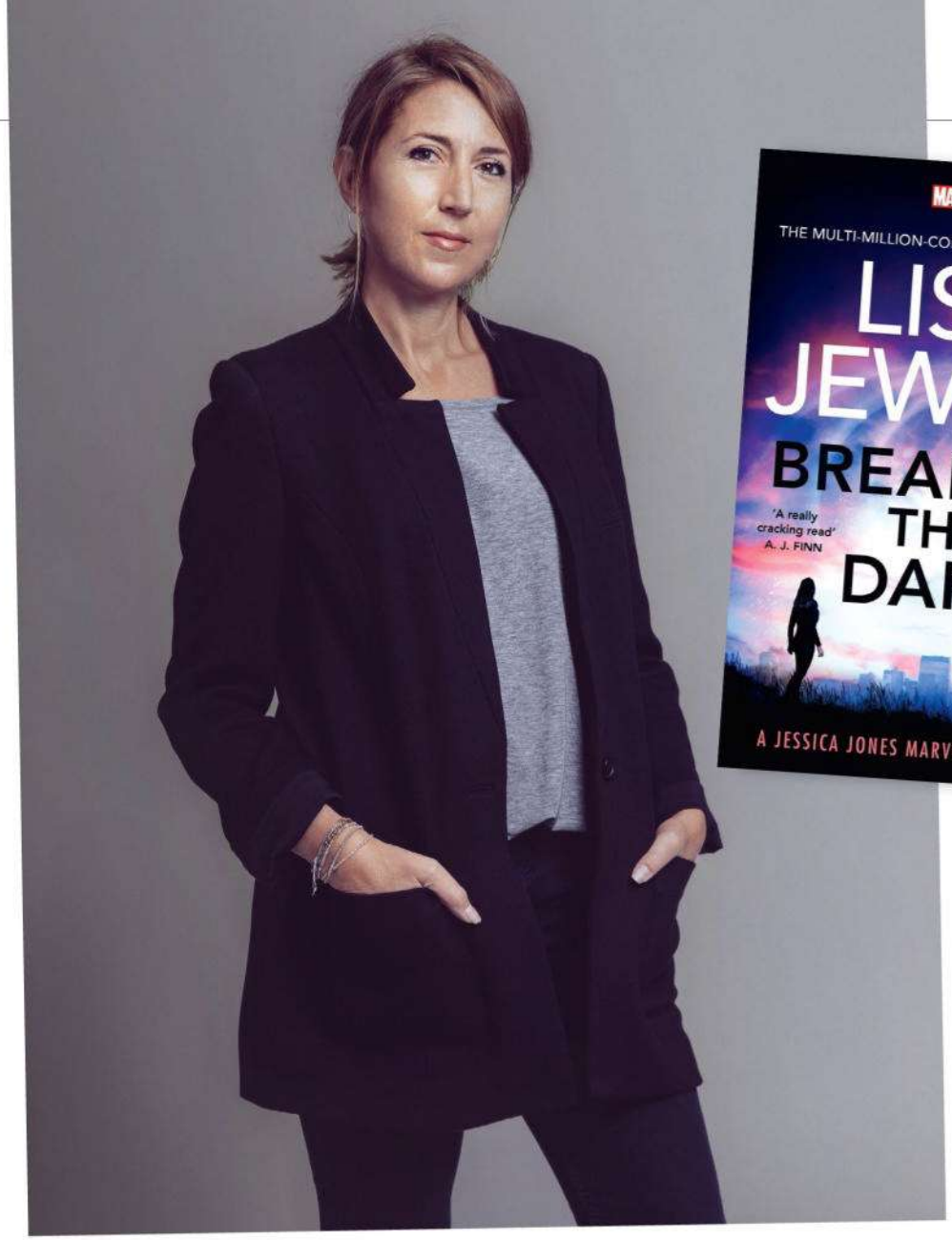
Flash! (Ah-aaaah). Saviour of the universe.

"While we can't get too deep into specifics, you can count on both Dr Zarkov and Dale Arden being key characters in this saga and other classic characters will make appearances too," adds editor Chas Pangburn, referring to the scientific genius who has already been glimpsed in issue 0. "However, it's important to note that we're intentionally making sure that every classic character has a purpose – they're not just a background player – and have a larger role in the overall story we're telling. For now, I'll just say that everything might not be as it seems."

With Pangborn describing the new series as "a perfect introduction to the character", Mad Cave also has several other upcoming projects featuring the blond-haired hero. This includes the first volume of the *Flash Gordon: Classic Collection*, which reprints Raymond and Moore's original Sunday newspaper strips from 1934-1937.

"Jeremy and Will are cooking up all sorts of sci-fi adventure, action, fun and heroism," he says. "It feels like a classic *Flash Gordon* tale, but it's being told with modern storytelling conventions. Meanwhile, Art Baltazar and Franco's *Flash Gordon Adventures* is an adorable and hilarious all-ages tale, which is perfect for younger readers. We also have the *Flash Gordon Quarterly* with multiversal takes on the character, and even more is planned. So needless to say, fans are in for treats!"

Flash Gordon issue one is out on 24 July. Flash Gordon: Classic Collection Volume One: On The Planet Mongo is out on 31 July.



AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

True Detective

The Only Way Is Essex for **Jessica Jones** in Lisa Jewell's first Marvel Crime novel WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

GROWING UP READING BRITISH girls' weeklies like *Tammy* and *Bunty*, the only Marvel character that Lisa Jewell has ever felt any connection with is Jessica Jones. Now the superhero-turned-PI is the focus of the author's latest novel *Breaking The Dark*, the first salvo in the new Marvel Crime line – which will be followed by an Alex Segura book featuring Daredevil and a Luke Cage title by SA Cosby.

"When it came to writing this novel, I had to put [any other versions] out of my mind and concentrate very much on Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos's original realisation of Jessica Jones in *Alias*," says Jewell, who set her story during 2003's *Alias* issue 21, at the conclusion of the six-part arc "The Underneath".

"I wanted it to take place during the build-up to her being pregnant with her child with Luke Cage," continues Jewell. "There's a scene in that issue where she's sitting in her office and it says, 'six weeks later' and I thought, 'Oh, there you go!' There's a whole six weeks of Jessica's life that was missing, so what was she doing? Maybe she had another case that Brian Bendis never wrote about?"

Known for bestselling psychological thrillers such as *Then She Was Gone* and *The Family Upstairs*, Jewell says she initially overemphasised the Marvel Universe's fantastical elements before realising that she should simply trust her natural instincts. "I went too far on many occasions and had to keep cutting stuff out because I'd end up with stuff like a huge underground lab full of mad scientists," she laughs.

"I then thought, 'Why am I writing about this stuff? This is meant to be a Lisa Jewell novel,' as the brief was very much, 'We want this to be a book that Lisa Jewell fans will pick up in a bookshop.' I eventually realised that I had to go back to what people like about my books and 'What do I like writing about?', which is creepy, weird people, strange families and unusual houses."

Hired by the mother of two spooky children to find out what happened to them during a UK summer break, Jewell is on familiar territory as Jessica journeys to the fictional Essex village of Barton Wallop, where she encounters the mysterious Belle.

"I just thought, why ask a British writer to write about an American character if you're not going to add a little bit of British flavour?" says Jewell. "I spent many hours on Marvel fandom sites and established that there was quite a big legacy and history of Marvel in Essex such as Braddock Manor, where Captain Britain lives."

Readers can expect appearances from Jessica's at the time on/off boyfriend Luke Cage, his erstwhile partner Danny Rand, and Madame Web. "At one point, I had Jessica going for noodles with Spider-Man in Chinatown, but I had to swap him for another character," says Jewell. "And I knew that by the end of the book, Jessica tells Luke that she's pregnant, so I wanted to put them together on the page as much as possible."

Breaking The Dark: A Jessica Jones Marvel Crime Novel is out now.

SCI-FACT! Debuting in 2001's *Alias* issue one, Jessica Jones was later retconned to be one of Peter Parker's classmates.

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

Weapon X²

Shawn Levy on why **Deadpool & Wolverine** will make us "lose our damn minds"

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

WHEN DISNEY ACQUIRED FOX, SUPERHERO geekdom erupted with joy. Marvel Studios could finally incorporate the X-Men into its cinematic universe! For Ryan Reynolds's Deadpool, though, the merger created a question: could the Merc with a Mouth exist within the PG constraints of the MCU?

Kevin Feige, the superhero studio's kingpin, mercifully decided to bring back Deadpool and allow him to continue swearing. But then came another question: who would direct? Luckily, Reynolds knew a guy.

"So I'm shooting *The Adam Project* with Ryan up in Vancouver," Shawn Levy says, "and he says, 'Okay, I know you're going to say no, but I'll only do *Deadpool* again if you direct it.' I told him I'd love to direct that movie, because the truth is, if you work in the big-canvas filmmaking space, as I have since those *Night At The Museum* movies, it's a dream to be able to tell a story on that kind of epic and anthemic canvas. I've always been a fan of Marvel movies, and I was already a fan of Deadpool and a huge fan of Wolverine, so the opportunity to join the Deadpool franchise but to do something notably different was compelling."

Ah, Wolverine. Reynolds had long spoken about wanting to bring back Hugh Jackman's clawed mutant for another adventure. In fact, one of the original pre-merger pitches for

Ryan Reynolds, Hugh Jackman and director Shawn Levy.

> **“Certainly, Wade is built to annoy the crap out of Logan”**

Right: Emma Corrin as Cassandra Nova.

Deadpool 3 was the two of them heading out on a road trip. But Hugh Jackman was done with the character after *Logan*, which meant Levy and Reynolds had to plan for a Deadpool film without Wolverine.

“When we were starting off working on this script, we were thinking about architecture,” says Levy. “I know it probably sounds pretentious, but we were thinking about the right structure of this movie so that it will not feel like sequel-itis, or a derivative repetition of the first two.”

They knew they wanted to bring back characters from Deadpool’s other two films as that would give the project emotional grounding. “[It wouldn’t be] save the universe again, but save the people Deadpool loves,” Levy continues. “We knew it felt right, but the movie didn’t have a real full reason to exist until the day Hugh Jackman called Ryan and asked if the three of us could do this together. And from that day on, we understood the movie. We saw it instantly.”

Jackman, it turned out, was more than keen to return as Wolverine. Even after a meeting with Feige, in which the Marvel boss tried to talk him out of it by describing *Logan* as a definitive ending, Jackman remained convinced that he had to come back. The idea of working with Reynolds and Levy sounded like too much fun.

“[We knew the movie] was going to be funny, but with this idea of oil and water like Logan and Wade – two people who are really built to loathe each other – there is another element,” Levy says. “Certainly, Wade is built to annoy the crap out of Logan. And he does. But what is that story of animosity and how does it evolve into maybe something resembling a brotherhood? That’s the story we wanted to tell.”

Plot details are under tight wraps. We know that Deadpool will meet the TVA – the timeline-hopping agency introduced in *Loki* – and will work with Wolverine to stop Emma Corrin’s Cassandra Nova, the evil twin of Charles Xavier, from causing chaos. Plus various reports have signalled that everyone from Jennifer Garner’s Elektra to Aaron Stanford’s Pyro will cameo.

“There are going to be moments that the audiences are going to love, but I’ll also say there are moments where they are going to lose their damn minds – like that times ten billion. Which is not a number, but I’m using it for hyperbole,” says Levy.

“There are some moments in this movie that if you can even hear the dialogue over the laughter, we’ve failed. We went through this in the edit room, when I’m telling Ryan that every time we show a certain scene you can’t hear the three lines because the audience is still laughing at the line that came before. Every time we had this very brotherly debate. Ryan usually won. He’s like, ‘Great, they’ll have to see the movie again!’”

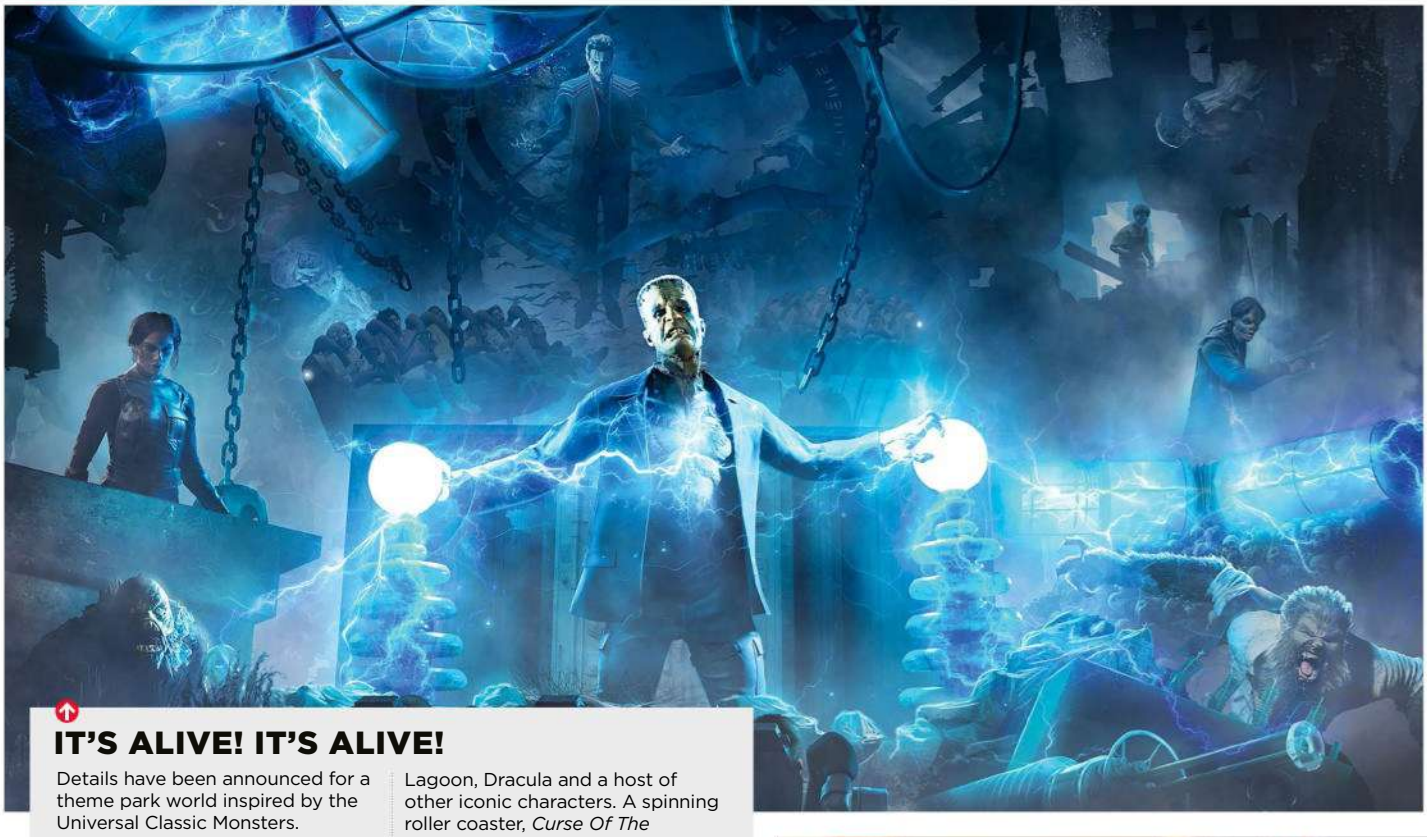
“At the end of the day, this movie is as warm-hearted as any movie I’ve ever made,” he continues. “It’s got a more sincere, human heart than almost any X-Men and Deadpool movie that I’ve seen. And so yes, it’s fun, it’s gruesome, it’s a blast and it’s gory, but it’s deeply poignant as well.”

Wade Wilson, Blind Al and Buck get their party on.

Deadpool & Wolverine is in cinemas from 25 July.

SCI-FACT! **Levy has previously worked with Hugh Jackman three times: *Real Steel*, *Free Guy* and *Night At The Museum 3*.**

SCI-FACT! **Overseeing experiments at Dark Universe is Dr Victoria Frankenstein, Henry's great-great-great granddaughter.**



IT'S ALIVE! IT'S ALIVE!

Details have been announced for a theme park world inspired by the Universal Classic Monsters.

Dark Universe, one of five lands at Universal Epic Universe in Orlando, will invite guests to visit Darkmoor, the village that Frankenstein's castle looms over.

It's here that *Monsters Unchained: The Frankenstein Experiment*, a new dark ride featuring state-of-the-art technology, unleashes the Mummy, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, Dracula and a host of other iconic characters. A spinning roller coaster, *Curse Of The Werewolf*, sits in the forest on the edge of the village, where guests will race to escape the creatures before they're turned themselves.

Dark Universe will be a complete immersive experience, including roaming characters, meet and greets, themed restaurants and a windmill that bursts into flames throughout the day (intentionally, we should probably add).

Universal Epic Universe opens in 2025, visit universalorlando.com.

Guests will need to smile at all times.

Otherwise this is the fate that awaits them.

EYE SPY

The latest release in the Lego Icons range gives *Lord Of The Rings* movie fans their chance to build the epic dark tower Barad-Dûr out of over 5,400 bricks. As well as the Eye of Sauron – which glows via a light brick and also rotates – the set includes a throne room with moving parts and 10 minifigures including Sauron, Mouth of Sauron, Orc, Frodo, Sam, Gollum and Gothmog.

Available now, visit lego.com/LOTR.

"So this Ring, then. Thoughts?"

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ Sylvester McCoy's 1988 season will be the next *Doctor Who: The Collection* Blu-ray. Season 25 is due for release later this year and will include a host of brand new special features, including extended versions of all four stories and new special effects, plus material from previous DVDs.

◆ **A surprise additional episode of *Tales Of The TARDIS*, showcasing an edited "Pyramids Of Mars" with new sound and effects, was broadcast on BBC Four ahead of the season finale. It's now available on BBC iPlayer.**

◆ Covers for the forthcoming Target novels have been revealed. *The Church On Ruby Road*, *Space Babies*, *73 Yards* and *Rogue* are released on 8 August.

◆ **The Fifteenth Doctor's sonic screwdriver is set to be released at San Diego Comic-Con this year. Fans will also be able to purchase new merchandise from season one, alongside a pink "The Happiness Patrol" vinyl TARDIS from Titan. Visit bbcdoctorwhocomiccon.com.**

◆ Three children's books are due for release later this year. *Doctor Who: The Official Guide* is published on 15 August. *Doctor Who: Fifteen Doctors Fifteen Stories* is released on 19 September and includes an adaptation of "Destination: Skaro", the Children In Need mini-episode. *The Official Annual 2025* is due for release on 5 September. Be quick, though – the 2024 annual sold out by November last year.

◆ **Panini will release *Black Sun Rising*, the second of their *Complete Back-Up Tales* graphic novels on 1 October. This will complete the run of Doctor-less material from *Doctor Who Weekly*.**

◆ A number of new audio drama releases have been announced by Big Finish.

Dark Gallifrey: The War Master is released in July; it's a trilogy of dramas that bring together Bernice Summerfield, David Warner's Doctor, Captain John Hart and Sir Derek Jacobi as the War Master.

Also available in July are **The Lost Stories: Operation: Werewolf** and **The Second Doctor Adventures: Conspiracy of Raven** featuring the Second Doctor, Jamie and Zoe.

Susan's War: Family Ties is released in August, pairing Susan with the War Doctor. A second collection, **Grandfather Time**, will be available at a later date.

The Fifth Doctor Adventures: The Great Beyond releases in September, reuniting the season 19 team. Georgia Tennant returns as Jenny in **Saving Time**, a box set of four new stories due for release in October. Also returning for a new box set that month is Paul McGann in **Time War Uncharted: Reflections**, alongside **The Third Doctor Adventures: The Quintessence**, which features Jo Jones and Mondasian Cybermen.

Celebrating 25 years of *Doctor Who* at Big Finish, **The Sirens Of Time – Redux** releases in November as a special director's cut with new sound design and music, as well as a new narrative order and additional scenes. Visit bigfinish.com for more info.

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

IMAGES: BBC

SCI-FACT! Parts of season 25 story "The Greatest Show In The Galaxy" were filmed in a BBC car park due to the discovery of asbestos.

SCI-FACT! **William Russell cameoed as Harry, a security guard at TV Centre, in 2013 docu-drama *An Adventure In Space And Time*.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

WILLIAM RUSSELL 1924-2024

Remembering one of the first TARDIS travellers

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

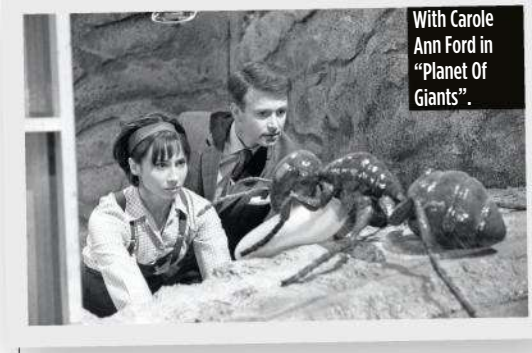
AS LOST-IN-TIME schoolteacher Ian Chesterton, William Russell was a reassuring presence in *Doctor Who*. For the children he was a proper grown-up, a solid, dependable authority figure among the monsters and the danger. For the adults he was a familiar face, an established star who helped anchor a show unlike anything else on TV.

Originally William Russell Enoch, the Sunderland-born actor knew his calling from an early age. "Acting was something I enjoyed doing as a young boy," he recalled. "I found myself drawn toward it." Organising entertainments during service in the RAF, he went on to build a career in repertory theatre before performing at the Bristol Old Vic and the Oxford Playhouse.

William Russell in a promotional headshot.

Television brought him fame as the dashing lead in *The Adventures Of Sir Lancelot* (1956-57), a hit export to the US. Adaptations of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *David Copperfield* followed this success. When producer Verity Lambert cast him in *Doctor Who* in 1963 she wanted his professional experience as much as his popularity: "There was a certain type of stamina needed in those days," he remembered of the rigours of TV production. A more obviously heroic foil to William Hartnell's prickly, mercurial Doctor, Russell remained in the series until 1965, riding the wave of Dalekmania.

He continued to move between screen and stage, from *Coronation Street* to the RSC. Genre credits include the witchy slasher *Terror* (1978), near-future fable *Death Watch* (1980) and a fleeting appearance as an Elder of Krypton in *Superman* (1978). Russell turned down the chance to play Ian again in 1983's "Mawdryn Undead" – the part was rewritten for the Brigadier – but finally returned to the role with a cameo in 2022's "The Power Of The Doctor", earning him a Guinness World Record for the longest gap between TV appearances as the same character.



With Carole Ann Ford in "Planet Of Giants".

© BBC

MARIA DE ARAGON 1942-2024

Canadian actress who appeared as Greedo in *Star Wars: A New Hope*.

RICHARD M SHERMAN 1928-2024

American songwriter who co-scored *Mary Poppins* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

NEW AUTHOR

SA MACLEAN

MEET THE ECOLOGY PROF BEHIND ROMANTASY THE PHOENIX KEEPER

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Aila followed her childhood dream and is now head zookeeper for the critically endangered Silimalo phoenix – but is also an anxious bi disaster who has an easier time talking to animals than people.

Any other magical creatures?
→ The zoo's full of familiar magical creatures: kelpies, krakens, unicorns, three species of dragon, four species of griffin. But we'll meet just as many brand new magical creatures inspired by real-world animals: purple pixie wrens, mirror flamingos and vanishing ducks to name just a few!

Did the book have any particular spark?
→ Ten years working in ecology and animal husbandry, where I've trained captive falcons, weighed day-old seagull chicks and cleaned flamingo ponds. The phoenix story specifically is inspired by the conservation of California condors, which were saved from extinction thanks to captive breeding in zoos.

Was much research required?
→ Most of mine came from firsthand experience! I was a volunteer keeper for the LA Zoo, where I learned all the routines of animal shifting, feeding, cleaning. Also, that jaguars smell surprisingly sweet up close!

Any advice for readers who are would-be authors?
→ Write something you love. Then revise, revise, revise! A good book starts with inspiration, but it comes to life with hard work.

The Phoenix Keeper is out on 13 August, published by Gollancz.

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PYRAMID SCHEME

DIRECTOR JAMIE DONOUGHUE TAKES *SFX* ON A TRIP IN THE REMEMBERED TARDIS FOR THE DOCTOR WHO SEASON FINALE

WORDS:
DARREN SCOTT

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WEDNESDAY 5 July, 2023. *SFX* is standing on the set of the Remembered TARDIS – completely new to us at this point, though readers will have seen our previous *Tales Of The TARDIS* set report before that first hit iPlayer in November.

Confused? No, we're completely oblivious at this point – all that is still to come. We don't even know that the scene we're watching being filmed literally has the Doctor, Ruby and Mel running from the now-titan god Sutekh. That's coming via greenscreen and VFX over a year later – which you'll have recently seen in the season finale, "Empire Of Death".

"It's a strange set up," producer Vicki Delow tells us, explaining that there are "various TARDISes" involved in today's filming, which is taking place in different studios. Wolf Studios, as we've probably mentioned before, is like an airport hanger. It even has actual roads and pavements inside.

KISSES TO THE PAST

The Remembered TARDIS, however, is minute by comparison, sitting at the end of a huge space. "The thing about the Remembered TARDIS is it's a very, very small set, very claustrophobic, and we want it to feel like that," director Jamie Donoughue explains. "But the practicalities of filming something like that are quite tricky a lot of the time.

"So we're constantly balancing away and people will see it on screen, and go, 'Oh it looks great.' But what they don't realise is we've not just got three actors in there. We've got a load of crew, we've got camera equipment, everything. So every little move is like a huge dance we have to create in there. So that's the challenges within it.

"Then, obviously, we saw all the SFX and stuff in there today, as well as huge health and safety things as well. So it's been a challenge, but it is great. It's all about collaboration. It's all about the camera team working with the art department, working with the actors, and there's SFX and when we're all in sync we can make these things happen. It's been one of my favourite sets, and I think it's Russell's favourite. I get emails constantly going, 'Oh my god, this is incredible. I love it.'"

They shoot a scene (216, take one) of Ncuti Gatwa, in a leather jacket, looking around the set and smiling. He's wide-eyed. He dashes out, revealing the '80s console complete with flashing '80s graphics.

The director steps in to ask Gatwa to look in a different direction, including a perfect look over shoulder with a wide, beaming grin.

There's an ominous stage direction of "Leave", and he rushes out. The scene is completed in four takes. Gatwa steps off set, removes the leather jacket and puts on a large puffer jacket.

Giant greenscreens stretch up towards the ceilings. Additional greenscreen is being filmed in another stage down the corridor. "It's hugely complicated," Donoughue says. "We want to end on a bang. What Russell has written, it's like a huge feature film. I think a lot of people are going to be shocked, if I can pull it off. So hopefully I will do!

"The best way of describing it is, you're not directing a show here – you're a custodian of something. When something has been with your public zeitgeist for so long, you've got such an added responsibility on your shoulders, because you don't just have to shoot the schedule and make a good episode, you have to appease so many people, and there's so many people it means so much too. So it's that next level of responsibility."

Mel Bush (Bonnie Langford) gets serious.

Millie Gibson as Ruby Sunday pauses on set.

Bad wolf! Bad, *bad* wolf! Sutekh reveals himself.

DOCTOR WHO PICTURES © BBC STUDIOS, YOSHITAKA KONO, JAMES PARDON, SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN, ALISTAIR HEAP

The Doctor and Millie visit a very dead 2046.

Even in death, ginger perseveres, apparently.

"The Three Amigos," says Bonnie Langford as she arrives and hugs her co-stars pre-blocking for the next scene. They're now all in big puffer jackets – despite it being July, the vast studios can be quite cold. The director pops in to give notes on beat and pace. "Bonnie is having a moment with her old Doctor here, " he explains of Mel's moment seeing Six's spotted cravat.

"Are you waiting for me?" Millie Gibson asks during a pause in filming.

"Don't worry, I can find more things to do," Gatwa says, motioning to a control console. "I'll fiddle around here." He sings as costume put him back into his leather jacket.

"Fiddle with the knobs and that's that," Gatwa says. "Just little ones, Ncuti," Langford says. "Just wee ones."

They're laughing and chatting, but as soon as someone yells "ACTION!" they're on in a millisecond. It's the scene where Ruby asks if this TARDIS can fly. They go for an additional take. "Not another one!" Gibson jokes, in a parody of the "Brenda from Bristol" voxpop.

Later, during rehearsal for scene 317, there's a discussion about biscuits. "No idea, but that custard cream is great..." Gatwa says. "Bourbons are not the ones for me." The same scene is shot from different angles for each character. Sometimes Gatwa asks to do scenes again. "One more for focus." They're moving on, but Gatwa wants to do one more and then... breaks the set. "Let's move on," someone says and Langford pulls a funny face. "It's not a quick fix by the looks of things."

People come on set to see if it can be repaired. It's the frame that holds the TV screen he's carrying.

"I mean, it has to be fixed anyway..." The problem is resolved within minutes, but Gatwa says it's time to move on and we're on to Langford. She's switched from flat pumps to heeled boots, fact fans. The discussion turns to cheese as Langford gets her hair touched up and coated with hairspray.

"I'm learning as everybody else is learning," Donoughue explains of his set filled with vintage props. "There's probably only a handful of people that could spot every little thing in there and know what it is, so luckily I've got a great team around me.

> **"When something has been with the zeitgeist for so long, you've got added responsibility"**

"Even with the actors – like, I'm with Bonnie, and she showed me what little things mean from her episodes. We work in the moment a lot as well, so we walked around there before, and we're like, 'Okay, what does this mean? What does that mean? Let's build that into the block. Let's have a moment there.'

"Even if it's only certain fans that it'll mean something to, then it's important. So it's been fantastic working on this, and what the guys have done with it is incredible. The art department on this is just a league above anybody else." →

Let it snow, let it snow... Ruby's Time Window.

Langford touches Colin Baker's costume. "Poor man had to dress like a clown for four years."

She explains the costumes to her co-stars. "This is Colin, this is Tom..." She jokes with various reactions in prep for her scene with Colin's coat, including a bad smell and fake vomiting. We laugh and are told they're rolling.

Langford suggests changing the blocking and the shot does look better. "It changes the wide, but you're not going to use that." She's a *pro*, ladies and gentlemen.

"I can't imagine you wearing this," Langford says to Gatwa.

"Oh I would!" he grins. "I definitely would!"

In the background she's schooling Gibson on where she'd worked with previous Doctors. The scene completed, the director grins. "Bonnie, that was *perfect*."

LIGHTS IN THE DARK

"I love Bonnie, absolutely. Bonnie is fantastic," Donoughue tells us later. "Having that history as well, I always ask her loads of questions all the time. She really helps on that side of things as well. So she's brilliant.

"There's certain people that come on set and just light the place up and it just brings such joy. Filming is very hard. I think people think it's very glamorous, and it's really tough. We work such long hours and we've just got to keep battling through and find creativity all the time.

"There's two people in this show that we always look forward to walking on set. One is Bonnie and the other is Lenny Rush, who just brings such light when he comes on to the set and everybody just feels amazing. And we need that, we need that lift as well. Working with those two has been the highlight of everything for me on this as well.

"I love him so much. He's an incredible actor, but one of the most inspiring people I know. He had so much fun because it is something that he would watch and the whole time he's like, 'Oh my god, I'm in it!', and he puts that energy on the screen. It's brilliant."

The director explains that each block of two episodes takes six weeks, meaning roughly three weeks for each episode. But time is running out for filming on season one.

"One of the things about TV in general is the schedule is so tight, and people don't realise how quick we have to shoot everything," he explains. "This in particular has hugely demanding sets within the story and the script is multi-layered. We're building stuff that has come completely out of Russell's imagination that just doesn't exist.

"So we have so many different departments we have to juggle, we've got SFX, VFX and then all the pre-vising of everything, then all the art department then, of course, the performances in it as well. So when we shoot something that might seem quite simple at the time, there's so many different elements of it. Because of that, we sometimes have to split our crews, we have multiple cameras shooting all over the place. So as we get towards the end of the shoot, I jump about between.

"One of the things about doing the final block is there is no more time – once we finish shooting, we finish shooting. So previous directors, if they had little bits to pick up, they could jump on during one of our shoots, grab an actor and do some bits, but *we* have a

The Doctor and the gang at UNIT get timey-wimey.

DIRECTING THE DOCTOR

Jamie Donoughue on working with Ncuti Gatwa

Ncuti has so much energy – what you see on screen is what you see as a person as well. I feel for Ncuti, because how do you take on a character like this? So much expectation, there's so many eyes on you as well, but he's got a really strong idea about it. He makes brave choices, but also he turns and he works with the directors as well.

We try things out and we find where the Doctor is with it. But instantly, as soon as you see him on camera you're like, "I can see him as the Doctor." He's been doing a fantastic job as well. A lot of people don't realise what a gruelling schedule it is for them. I mean, this is every single day, sometimes we shoot six days a week as well. If we keep that energy level up, it's seriously impressive. But you know, you look at Ncuti and you see a Hollywood star there. He's arguably going to be one of the best Doctors we've seen.

STOCK ELEMENTS: LUKAS SEPTA INDRA WIBOWO, ISTOCK/GETTY

Who *is* Mrs Flood? We know! (Okay, we don't.)

defined cut-off line. So we really are up against it and have to come up with every trick in the book."

Between this set and the next we're about to visit, we take a detour outside where the roof of Ruby's house – yes, just the top of it – is sat ready for Mrs Flood's close-up. But we know nothing of that as we head past and walk onto the vast soundstage housing the Time Window.

It's described to us as a "sort of UNIT secret". The set, Donoughue tells us, was only completed the week before filming.

Delow adds that it's "probably one of our biggest sets". The whole thing took almost nine weeks to complete.

The TARDIS stands in a large room, behind a glass window that's smashed. In front of that are banks of controls. Gibson's stunt double, Annie, is playing Ruby here because Gibson can't physically be on two sets at the same time.

On a UNIT security panel we see ourselves on camera in a large chamber that says "Caution. Check door seals. Artron Energy Discharge. Access by level 5 operative only".

There are people moving the TARDIS around and hoovering the set – these, we are told, will be scenes involving snow.

Donoughue explains they have to film the scene so many times for variations of effects. "The Time Window was technically one of the most challenging things we've had to do. A lot of it is mathematical and VFX. One of the big things is that a lot of the time the actors just have to perform to a greenscreen or bluescreen. So within that environment, I have to make sure of their performances and work with them to make it on point, because it's quite difficult sometimes when we're just in a box.

"One of the great things about *Doctor Who* is we always try to avoid VFX as much as we can, we try to make it practical. That's what made *Doctor Who* great, in what it was originally. So we're always trying to lean into that."

No one's mentioning the S-word, such is the secrecy surrounding the finale's Big Bad. Even Donoughue didn't know at first, as he reveals. "In the early days, even I was kept secret from it very early on. We have code names for everything. But it's been incredible to do. It's been an honour to tackle this enemy, and I hope that I do it justice!"

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

Lenny Rush as Morris Gibbons with his deadly ride.

A FEW OF OUR FAVOURITE THINGS

Spotted in the Remembered TARDIS

- K-9's head on a roundel
- Raggedy Doctor doll
- Various TARDIS keys
- Seal of Rassilon on a Yankee Candle jar
- Fez on a Toclafane
- Reinette's fireplace
- Fourth Doctor's scarf
- Sixth Doctor's coat and cravat
- *History Of The Time War* book
- Portrait of Jo Martin
- Eleven's top hat
- Scanner connectors from the TV Movie
- Pertwee's UNIT pass
- Orange space suit and helmet
- Clara's blackboard
- Handles Cyber head
- UNIT files
- Copy of *The Time Machine*
- *A Journal of Impossible Things* by Verity Newman
- River Song's diary
- Yaz's police badge
- *Advanced Quantum Mechanics* book (with a TARDIS on the spine)
- *Mulholland Drive* on DVD
- WHO1 registration plate
- Various console panels in odd places, including one on the roof
- Fifteen's jukebox
- The fixture that hangs above the original 1963 console

DEFY MAVI

NOBODY EXPECTS THE FANNISH INQUISITION! EXCEPT *DOCTOR WHO*'S **RUSSELL T DAVIES**, WHO KNOWS *SFX* ONLY TOO WELL

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

WHEN *SFX* CATCHES UP with *Doctor Who* showrunner Russell T Davies in his office at Wolf Studios in Cardiff, he is – as you might expect from someone overseeing the Whoniverse – very busy. He's sending notes on someone's script and about to go and watch the first edit of season two, episode seven.

But we have *questions*. So many, in fact, that we're splitting this interrogation, sorry, interview, over two issues...

Why did you include a glimpse of Richard E Grant's Doctor when the Doctor is scanned in "Rogue"?

◆ Fun. Enormous fun, absolutely, literally. We talked about that many times with Kate and Briony. Just fun, a joke. It's funny. It's that simple. I sat here in his office with [writers] Kate [Herron] and Briony [Redman], and they just thought "an unknown Doctor" – that's what the script said, because we had to work out who to get and how we could get him.

And he was so up for it. He went and took that photo especially, he went into Soho for a special photoshoot for that. You have to clear this with people, you have to kind of book him. He wasn't paid the fee he would've been paid to be a Doctor, obviously. He was so up for it and went and did that, especially for us. Very last minute!

Because we weren't sure whether to do it or not, partly because we're busy, and there was a lot of extra paperwork just to do that. But as we watched that parade of Doctors, we just sat and went, "We've got to put an extra one in, we've got to." That's the fun of it.

Is that... Richard E Grant? Yep.

It does seem you're having more fun with the whole thing...

◆ Yes, exactly, yes. Yes, yes. Sometimes these things online are taken very seriously, but most people just burst out laughing. It doesn't presage anything, it's not the return of the "Shalka" Doctor [from 2003 animation "Scream Of The Shalka"]. Or is it the "Curse Of Fatal Death" Doctor? [the 1999 Comic Relief spoof in which Grant also appeared]. I don't know. It's the "Shalka" Doctor to me, I'll be honest. →

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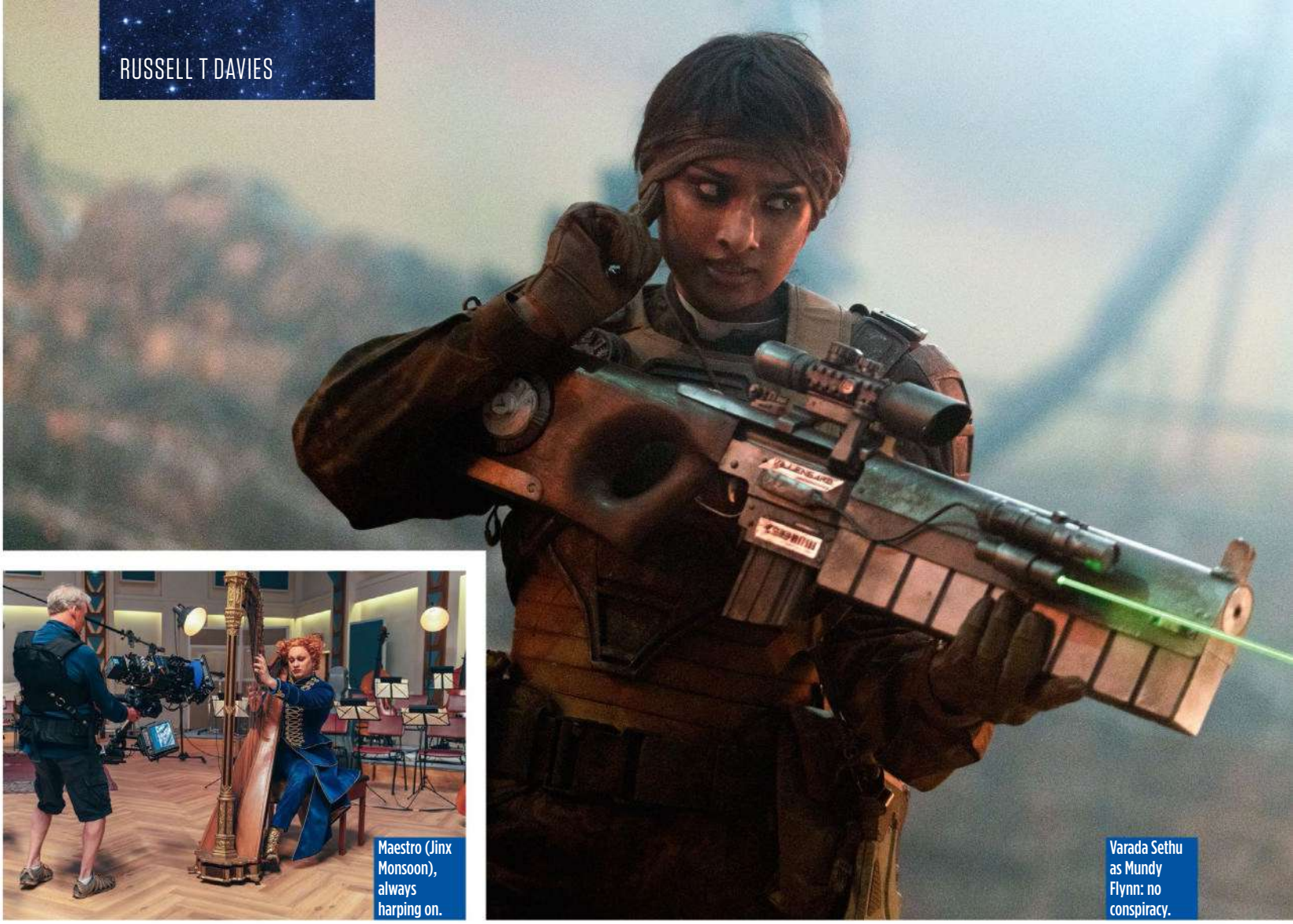
TY

Russell's not telling all about "73 Yards".



Maestro (Jinx Monsoon), always harping on.

Varada Sethu as Mundy Flynn: no conspiracy.

“Mavity is not resolved, it’s permanent. It’s absolutely permanent. That’s what gravity is”

I wrote to [“Shalka” writer] Paul Cornell the night before, saying, “Please watch tomorrow because there’s such a treat in store,” and he was *so* delighted. But it’s really nice when you can do things like that. That was a really nice moment between me and Paul, we’re old friends going back decades. It was lovely.

A little bit of payment there because he created the Ninth Doctor with the Shalka and we completely replaced him with Christopher Eccleston as the Doctor. So how nice all these years later, to take a little lean back and sort of say, the door’s open now, thanks to “The Timeless Child”, and you can come in and own your Doctor again. Really, it’s not just fun, it’s a nice thing to do.

Season two companion Varada Sethu appeared in “Boom”...?

◆ I think we might as well just be simple with this, because we’ve already said she’s not coming back as Mundy Flynn. It’s one of those very simple situations, like with Freema [Agyeman, who appeared in “Army Of Ghosts” before being cast as Martha Jones]: when you cast a great actor, you need a new companion. I was watching, like, the 15th edit of “Boom”, *loving* her. Every time I watch her, I think, “God, she’s brilliant”, I literally think she’s brilliant. I used to watch her thinking, “God, what a shame we can’t work with her again.”

I was thinking, “Should we go back to the 51st century, could we meet her again?” and then I suddenly went “Oh, let’s just cast her again. We’ve done that before. Lovely.” The relief that went around the entire production and the BBC, everyone went, “Oh, great.” It was the most instant yes you’ve ever seen.

So she didn’t even have to audition. We then invited her to come in for a meeting, but she thought she was coming in to audition [laughs] and it was the other way round. It’s like we were auditioning. We were wanting her to like us so much that she’d want to come back!

We had a great meeting. She was kind of amazed and delighted. Lovely. Good stuff ahead. Completely new character, again, a completely new story and that’s a great new story that will run across eight episodes.

Breaking the fourth wall happened a few times and hasn’t been resolved...

◆ That hasn’t been explained, and it might never be, frankly. It’s very interesting, within the *Doctor Who* offices, we know exactly why that happens and yet I’m showing no sign of putting that on screen. There is actually a reason for it that was in a very early draft of “The Star Beast”.

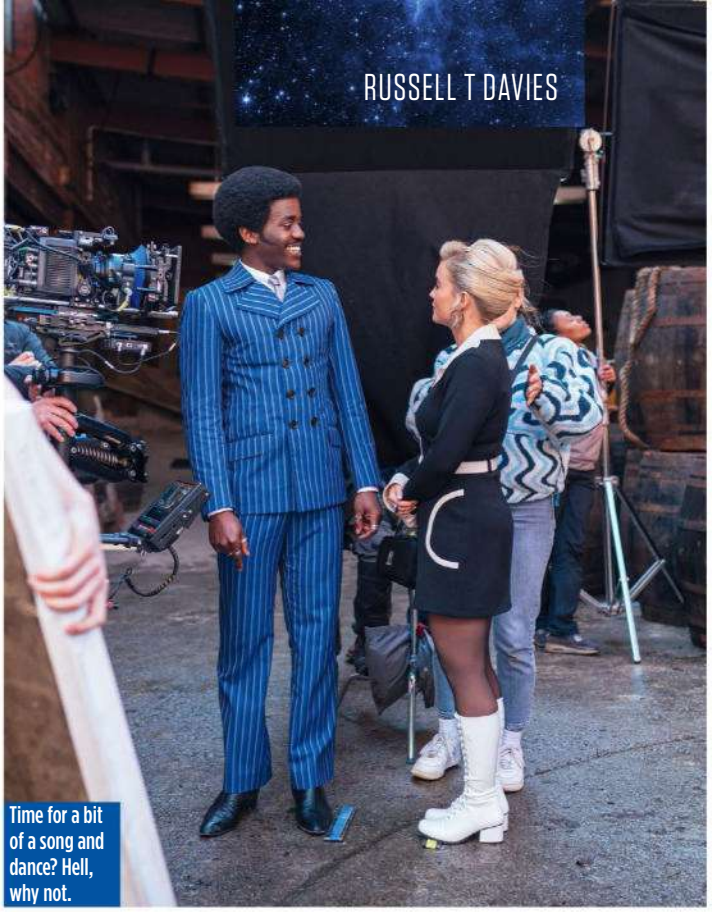
Mrs Flood (Anita Dobson) chats to *you*.

But I see no need to explain it whatsoever. My sister watches that, she doesn’t blink. She actually doesn’t blink when a character turns to camera and gives them a wink. I mean, you would if it was *Pride And Prejudice*, that would be odd. But there’s something showy about *Doctor Who*, there’s something proscenium arch about it. There’s something arch about it, full stop. I think it’s a programme which you can very happily turn towards the audience. It’s a very fine, very simple tradition.

DOCTOR WHO PICTURES © BBC STUDIOS. YOSHITAKA KONO, JAMES PARDON, SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN, ALISTAIR HEAP

Callie Cooke on the set of "Dot And Bubble".

The Duchess (Indira Varma) reveals her true form.


Time for a bit of a song and dance? Hell, why not.

Newton discovers mavity in "Wild Blue Yonder".

And what about "gravity" being renamed to "mavity"...?

◆ It's not resolved, it's permanent. It's absolutely permanent. That's what gravity is. It's funny. It's *very* funny and it makes me laugh and it's staying. [Bangs desk]

It's enormously funny. All the comic strip people are having to do it, all the novel people are having to do it. How funny is that? I think people are kind of looking for a plot in it. I can't imagine what that would be. What on earth would that be? If anyone came up with a good plot based on the fact that a word has changed two of its consonants then good luck. He said, having built entire plots out of puns!

In the end, it's immensely creative. That's what's brilliant. All of us, for years, have juggled with the notion of the fictional series that exists between Patrick Troughton regenerating and Jon Pertwee appearing – what do they call it, 6B?

There's a great fan superstition, because of the comic strip: the Doctor escapes, instead of being regenerated by the Time Lords, he escaped to Earth for a bit and then turned into Jon Pertwee. So there's a gap in the narrative there in which people write stories. The whole Big Finish is dedicated to gaps in the narrative, writing stories. So actually, this is very creative, very funny. One day, you can probably rest assured that in 30 years' time, someone will write a novel in which the mavity/gravity pun turns out to be absolutely essential, the Doctor uses it to save the world. "Look, you missed out a letter," he says and presses a button, and so you can happily hand that over to viewerships.

I might take the piss out of the discourse, but actually it's *terribly* creative and I kind of know that by leaving gaps in shows that this gets filled. It doesn't remotely bother me that the woman in "73 Yards" doesn't get fully explained. I know exactly what's going on and I haven't seen anyone else guess what's going on, but it's actually very clear what's going on. But that's creative. Let people be talking about it for years to come.

Were there many scenes that were cut for time? Could we see a Director's Cut of episodes in future?

◆ One of the writers asked for next year about a Director's Cut or something and we can't afford to do that. There's very little cuts. I think there's lines, little lines, here and there. There's no whole scenes cut. I don't think there were.

I know there's one scene. There's one scene we deliberately cut at the end of "The Devil's Chord", actually, because they run onto the rooftop and there was a scene where the Doctor said, "Oh, time's gonna go crazy now, music is flooding back in, and everything's gonna be strange for 10 minutes" to kind of explain why they burst into song.

We did shoot that, that existed as a scene, and then we watched it, and that's boring, explaining why you burst into song. Why explain why you burst into song? Just burst into song! So I think that scene possibly would've made a lot of people happy. I'm really glad we took it out! It's only 20 seconds of dialogue, it was nothing. I can't think of anything else that we cut.

Those extra Susan Twist appearances in "The Legend Of Ruby Sunday" imply other adventures...

◆ I think *Doctor Who*'s always done that, there's always been off screen adventures, but I think they probably happened between episode six and episode seven. There was a huge prologue written of very expensive scenes that all had to be cut in which the Doctor saw Susan Twist in many places.

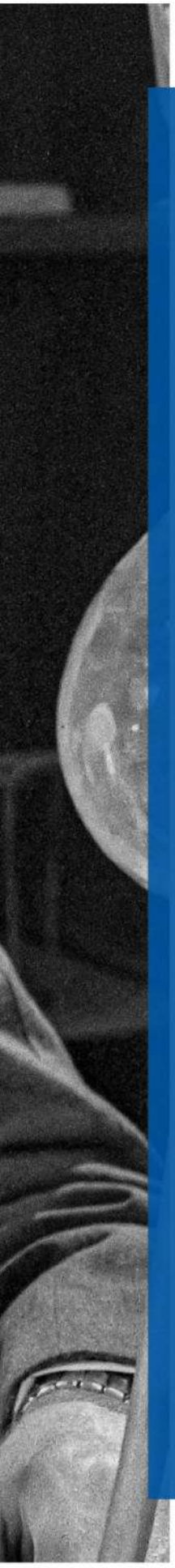
There was a scene with Zarbi. He went to Vortis and Susan Twist was an astronaut addressing the Zarbi saying, "Welcome! Welcome to the Empire, on behalf of the Emperor Horatio," she said in a spacesuit. All got cut, which is such a shame.

But in my mind, all those things still happened and they are all going to be in the novel. Never filmed, it was cut right at the first draft. They came to me and said, "You're four days over budget" which is crucial, four days. It was just four days, so that had to go...

RUSSELL T DAVIES WILL RETURN

One of Susan Twist's many incarnations.

PICTURES: © BBC. TYPE: LUKAS SEPTA INDRA WIBOWO/GETTY



CLASS ACT

IN TRIBUTE TO THE LATE WILLIAM RUSSELL, *SFX* PRESENTS AN ARCHIVAL INTERVIEW WITH ONE OF THE FIRST STARS OF *DOCTOR WHO*

WORDS:
NICK SETCHFIELD

HERE AT *SFX* WE'VE INTERVIEWED a universe of *Doctor Who* stars over the years. But it was a singular thrill to meet William Russell.

Perhaps it was the fact he had been there at the very beginning. As schoolteacher Ian Chesterton he had been whisked from the classrooms and corridors of Coal Hill School into the wilds of time and space, abducted by a wary alien in possession of an impossible blue box. This was the man, after all, who had walked on Skaro, Marinus and Vortis and been knighted by Richard the Lionheart seven centuries before he was born. The magic of those early Saturdays still clung to him. To be honest we half-expected him to be in black and white, maybe even flickering slightly around the edges.

It was an apt time to meet someone from the primordial dawn of *Doctor Who*. The series was just about to return to prime time BBC One, reimagined for a whole new generation. At *SFX*'s suggestion the genial 80-year-old signed the VHS sleeve of "An Unearthly Child", the first adventure, as a token of good luck for new showrunner Russell T Davies, mischievously adding "Don't mess it up!" (historical footnote: he didn't).

William Russell always seemed to fight shy of the limelight, never cashing in on his part in the creation of a TV legend. He was self-effacing, too. When we met him he was at the BBC Audiobooks studios in Bath, recording narration for a CD release of "The Crusade", a story he had made in 1965. Asked what he thought of the performance by his younger self he grinned and admitted "I always think I'm terrible!" How wrong he was.

Here's an extended version of the interview that originally ran in *SFX* in 2005, presented in tribute to the man whose sincere, charming and quietly heroic performance helped make *Doctor Who* a phenomenon.

How did you get the role of Ian Chesterton?

◆ It was an idea of Verity's [producer Verity Lambert]. I'd done quite a lot of television before, as a sort of action man, and she came along and asked if she could meet me in the BBC bar. We had a long chat and we got on very well. I was quite excited about the idea of her coming in. She was something very new to the BBC. All the people I'd worked with seemed like old schoolmasters – very nice, but avuncular, and here was this very attractive young woman. She explained that it was all new, and how they were trying to create something different. I liked her, and the more she talked about it the more I liked the idea. She asked me to think it over and then she told me that Bill [William Hartnell] was going to be playing Doctor Who.

Did you feel as though you were the de facto lead in the show? You'd been the dashing man of action in so many other things...

◆ That's really what they wanted, that's right. I'd done quite a bit for BBC Children's TV. I'd done a series of a Robert Louis Stevenson book called *St Ives*, playing the lead, and he was a very dashing young Frenchman, and I think all these things were an attraction, and the reason why she asked me.

Did you feel that you were almost carrying the show, in a sense?

◆ No, I didn't feel that at all, but I could see that because of Bill's age I was going to be doing the fights and the things like that. But Bill was a very →

> **“There wasn’t any feeling that you were a celebrity, or at least I didn’t feel it”**

distinguished film actor and I admired him enormously. Then when I met Jacquie [Hill] I liked her very much, and I’d seen her in plays and television. Carole [Ann Ford] I didn’t know at all. Carole seemed so marvellously right to play the grandchild of someone from outer space. There was a chemistry, and it was certainly there from the point of view of the staff and the BBC.

How did the BBC regard the show in the beginning?

◆ I think there was quite a bit of jealousy. People didn’t quite know where we fitted. Were we Children’s, or were we Children’s and adult or whatever? No one actually knew quite where we came.

What was William Hartnell like? We understand he could be a bit abrasive.

◆ He was such a good actor – and he was actually such a good comedian, which surprised me at the time. Then he told me that he’d started in farces and light comedy stuff. Yes, he could be very abrasive, but he never was with me. The four of us did get on very, very well.

Did you have a social life together outside of *Doctor Who*?

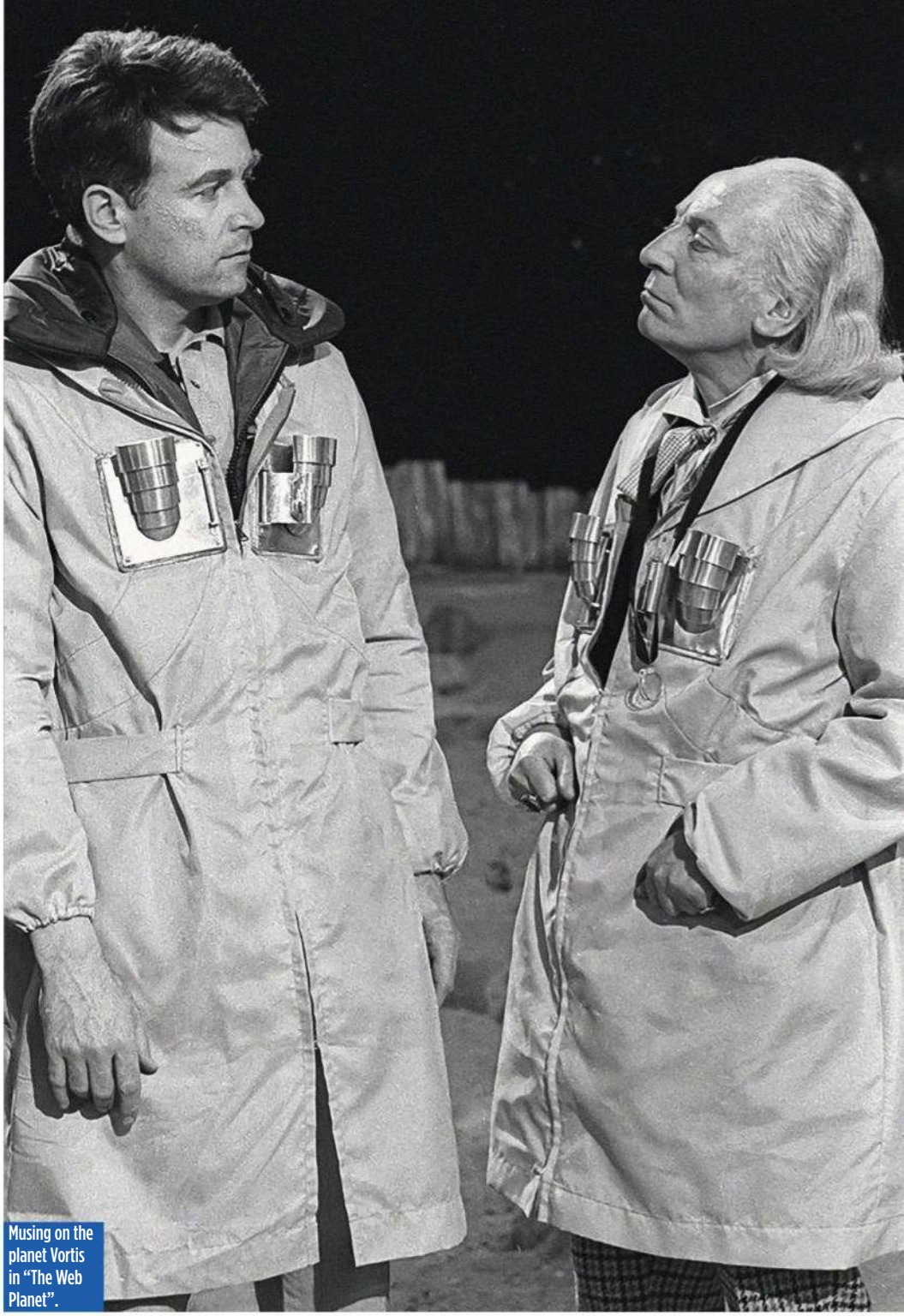
◆ We made a social life. We always had lunch together and that sort of thing. When we moved to Riverside [Studios] we took it in turns to do lunch, so every month it would come around and it would be your turn. So yes, we did get on very well. We liked each other. And I still see Carole – we have meals together. And it was very sad when Jacquie died [Jacqueline Hill passed away in 1993]. But yes, we did click.

The first episode of *Doctor Who* went out the day after John F Kennedy was killed. Can you remember where you were when you heard the news?

◆ I was in a television studio! We were doing “The Daleks”!

Was there one point where you realised that the show was a success?

◆ Oh yes. It was when Bill came in from lunch one day, with the *Evening Standard*, and it was at the time General de Gaulle was saying no, we couldn’t join the Common Market and [Leslie Illingworth], the famous cartoonist, had done a Dalek, but it was General de Gaulle saying “Non!” I still remember opening it and thinking, “That’s it – fame indeed.’” When you’re using our Daleks in the political arena...



Musing on the planet Vortis in “The Web Planet”.

Of course I now know that the ratings shot up. They were always quite good, but now they were topping eight, nine million, and that was pretty good in those days.

How did you deal with the recognition in the street?

◆ As a matter of fact, you didn’t get that much.

Stuntman Derek Ware with Russell.

When I did *Coronation Street*, more recently, I couldn’t go anywhere, walk down the street, without people saying, “Are you going to marry Rita?” But that never happened on *Doctor Who*. I don’t think it happened in those days. You could go and have a drink in your pub. There wasn’t any feeling that you were a celebrity, or at least I didn’t feel it in any sense. It’s very different today. Very, very different.

You and Jacqueline Hill left in the same story, “The Chase”. Was it something that you talked about together?

◆ Well, Carole left because she didn’t like going “Heeelp!” and all that business, and so Maureen [O’Brien] came in. Of course I talked

A lighter moment for the First Doctor.

Hey Doctor, he's got a point, you know...

Russell with Jacqueline Hill and Maureen O'Brien.

"Fam? *Fam*? What a vulgar word!"

Escaping cavemen in "An Unearthly Child".

Russell (back left) making a final cameo in 2022.

to everyone about it, except Bill, who was furious. He was very cross. He couldn't understand it. He said, "You're in a success, why the hell don't you stay?" And I said, "Well, I've done it now for 18 months, and I don't want to do it any more. I want to do something different. I want to go back to the stage." And Jacquie and I went off and did a play together. But Bill was really rather mystified. Older actors always used to feel that once you had your arse in butter, as they used to say, you kept it there. You didn't go off.

Were you aware that there were plans to bring back Ian in 1983, for the show's twentieth anniversary?

◆ Yes, they talked to me about it, but they knew I didn't want to do it. I didn't believe that it was a good idea to go back. I'd played the part, and I was doing other things. I was busy as an actor and I didn't really want to go back and do *Doctor Who* again.

You don't regret that now?

◆ No, not at all.

We all wanted you to come back, obviously!

◆ Well, thank you very much!

Would you still say no?

◆ What, today? I can't see myself being approached. Maybe a cameo as an old senator!

Did you actually follow *Doctor Who* after you left?

◆ I didn't, really. I was away, and I was busy, I was acting. I did a lot of television. Television plays kept coming along, and I always liked going back to the theatre.

Did you never catch it on a Saturday night with Tom Baker and say something like "What on Earth is this? It bears no relation to what I was doing..."

◆ [Laughs] I didn't, no. I've never seen one!

Do you ever watch any of your own stories?

◆ Well, only when my children want to mock me. Quite recently, at a party, my 15-year-old was saying, "Oh, they're awful! Look at the scenery wobbling! What's so fantastic about that?" All the things we hope the new *Doctor Who* will be providing us with!

Will you be tuning in?

◆ Oh, I shall watch that, yes, with great interest. I think it's probably a marvellous time for *Doctor Who* to come back, because they've got all this incredible stuff they can do now, after watching *The Matrix* and all that kind of thing. When I think of what we used to do...

This particular one, "The Crusade", I can remember this scene in a forest, around a bush, and there were Saracens and the four of us and a party of English knights, around 15 of us, in a space about this big, all trying to look as if we couldn't see each other!

It became more interesting when we moved into Television Centre to do them, and at Riverside actually, but Studio D Lime Grove... They had to stop every moment to move the TARDIS. We'd do the first TARDIS scene and then we had to stop, strike the set, build the next set. Everything was very different.

William Russell 1924-2024

PICTURES: © BBC, MIRRORPIX/GETTY

ACADEMY

THE HARGREEVES SIBLINGS ARE BACK, BUT THIS TIME THEY'VE LOST THEIR POWERS. SHOWRUNNER

REWARDS

STEVE BLACKMAN TELLS *SFX* WHAT'S IN STORE FOR **THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY**'S FINAL SEASON

WORDS: RICHARD EDWARDS

THINK BACK TO EARLY 2019, A TIME when the Avengers were yet to face their endgame, and the words "superhero" and "fatigue" were rarely mentioned in the same sentence. The Marvel Cinematic Universe was still 100% cinematic, The Boys were yet to push the boundaries of superpowered good taste, and the Arrowverse was still the primary destination for comic-book-inspired TV shows.

This was the world that first welcomed *The Umbrella Academy*, Netflix's adaptation of Gerard Way and Gabriel Bá's Dark Horse comic about a superpowered – but prodigiously dysfunctional – family, a clan who made the Avengers look like the Waltons. Not that showrunner Steve Blackman ever thought he was operating in the same space as Marvel and DC's biggest hitters

"If I'm honest with you, I don't see this as a superhero show," he tells *SFX*. "'A dysfunctional family show with a body count' has been my logline as I write it. I love that the Hargreeves family have these abilities, but I think you could also have this show where they're just an interesting family of siblings.

"*The Royal Tenenbaums* was definitely one of my main driving factors in the way I saw *The Umbrella Academy*," he adds, "and to be honest, I'm a little sad that I won't get to write this family any more after this year."

HAPPIER FAMILIES

Why the abrupt full stop? It's already been confirmed that the upcoming fourth season will be the show's last, bringing the Hargreeves siblings' dimension-hopping squabbles to an end. But first, they're going to have to deal with a dilemma familiar to Superman, Spider-Man and several X-Men: what do you do when your superpowers desert you? The Temps Commission – known, in our dimension, as Netflix – have asked *SFX* not to reveal where the powered-down Hargreeves find themselves at the start of the season, but it's safe to say they will, at some point, become super again.

"Each year we've tried to evolve and challenge these characters," says Blackman. "I thought, 'What is a superhero's journey if you find you're no longer a superhero?' was a wonderful place to start the final season. It hasn't turned out exactly how the Hargreeves expected – some are doing better, some are doing worse – and that was our intention."

But what does that mean when your entire life has been defined by the fact you possess a very particular set of skills? Whether it's talking to the dead (Klaus), possessing super-strength (Luther) or sprouting prehensile squid tentacles from your torso (Ben). "That's the challenge for them," Blackman teases. "I think it's also very revealing of who they are. For example, Diego [former skill: mastery of throwing weapons] is having a very hard time in his domestic life and longs for a chance to go back to the way it was. Whereas I think Viktor [former skill: converting sound into high energy blasts] is doing really well, almost away from the family and *not* being a superhero."

Nick Offerman and Megan Mullally as the doctors.

Colm Feore as Reginald Hargreeves himself.

Allison (Emmy Raver-Lampman) and Lila (Ritu Arya).

It's borderline impossible to recap the previous three seasons of *The Umbrella Academy* without also supplying a textbook in high-level quantum physics – even Blackman admits, "There's days [in the writers' room] where we're looking at each other saying, 'Does anyone understand what's going on now?" Nonetheless, here's our short-form, Letts Revision-style summary of what's come before.

In October 1989, 43 children were born with a variety of superpowers. Seven of those kids were adopted (and given numbers) by eccentric billionaire Sir Reginald Hargreeves, and subsequently moulded into a crime-fighting team. They gradually became estranged, but were reunited for Hargreeves' funeral in 2019.

In the three seasons since, they've averted at least two apocalypses, taken an extended

Allison, Tom, Diego, Lila, Number Five and Klaus.

vacation in 1963, bickered with their Sparrow Academy counterparts from a parallel dimension, and discovered their dear old dad is actually an alien who's been manipulating the timeline for his own ends.

At the start of season four, the newly powerless Hargreeves have gone their separate ways, but are brought back together by another family gathering. This time it's a kids' birthday party rather than a funeral, however, and Blackman believes that the intra-sibling dynamics have gone through a noticeable evolution.

"Although they have their issues – and they may not admit it – I think they really love each other," he explains. "If you go back to episode one they're strangers, but they love each other now in that weird way siblings can. They have to work through some forgiveness with each other, but they also want to look out for each other. That is not where we started the show."

SFX has seen the first three episodes of the new six-part run, and it's clear that getting all of the Hargreeves clan in one place was at the top of the writers' room's to-do list.

"The fans seem to just love the family when they're together, and I've come to realise that the fans are usually right," Blackman laughs. "It's harder to write scenes with that many people in them, but frankly they're the most fun. So yes, the intention was to spend as much time with them as a group as we could this year."

GENE (AND JEAN) THERAPY

Blackman may not see his protegés as superheroes, but they still need an antagonist to face. In the new season, a cultish group of conspiracy theorists known as the Keepers have realised that alternative universes exist, and have become obsessed with recovering rare artefacts from other worlds. If you've got any memorabilia from the 2000 Olympics in New York, or the campaign to get John F Kennedy re-elected, they'll want to hear from you. They also believe that we're all trapped in →

Going equipped: Elliot Page as Viktor.

NUMBER THREE

Emmy Raver-Lampman is Allison Hargreeves

How does Allison feel about losing her power to make other people do anything she says?

● I think there's maybe a little bit of relief, because I think a lot of her questioned whether or not she would have what she has, or be who she was, if she didn't have her powers. At the beginning of this season, I enjoyed playing a very normal version of Allison who is having to work for everything she has, and I think she enjoys it for a time. But there is definitely a sense of guilt because of what she did to all her siblings.

Are there still ramifications following her decision to betray her siblings in season three?

● That's something she's chewing on for the whole season. After three seasons with this family she finally got back to Claire [her daughter] to try to be the mom that she wanted to be – a version of the mom she never really had. I think she has decided that to be able to move on, she has to feel like it was worth it. And even though nobody really wants to see her, seeing everybody else doing okay takes a bit of the edge off.

How have you managed to keep track of the show's many timelines and twists?

● Very early on I realised that for my own mental health and because of the longevity of shooting the show – it can take almost nine months to make a full season – I just have to focus on my storyline. Because if you're trying to hold on to everybody else's, where they are and what they're doing, it just gets so cloudy. Thank god we have script supervisors, who are keeping track of all the timelines. I long ago gave up trying to hold on to all of that because it was making me crazy!

Another fun family outing in glorious... wait and see.

the wrong timeline. "It's usually the Hargreeves who have a wink at the world [about parallel timelines], but I thought it would be fun to say that many more people know what's going on," explains Blackman.

"The Keepers are sort of in tune with what's happening, and they're absolutely right: there *is* something going on. The Keepers also felt with the times in terms of what's going on in our world – we always love a good conspiracy on *The Umbrella Academy*."

The group is led by Gene and Jean (played by *Parks And Recreation* stars and real-life husband-and-wife Nick Offerman and Megan Mullally), a couple whose outwardly folksy demeanour is merely cover for an extremely sinister edge.

"I worked with Nick a while ago on *Fargo* season two," recalls Blackman. "He was at the back of my mind when I was thinking of Gene and then, to my absolute delight, it turned out that he and Megan are super-fans of the show.

"I think that the opportunity for them to work together playing husband and wife was fun for them, and they were delightful from start to finish. I had one rule for them: try to do one version of what I wrote, then do whatever else you want. Some of the best lines came from them because they're such comic geniuses. They really embodied the characters."

THIS IS THE END

Back in the 2024 of *SFX*'s timeline, the entertainment world has shifted significantly since the Hargreeves first reunited for their old man's funeral. After the aforementioned peak of *Avengers: Endgame*, superheroes on big and small screens have become even more ubiquitous, while the concept of the multiverse has gone mainstream – everywhere from the MCU to the Oscar-winning *Everything Everywhere All At Once*.

Luckily, Blackman doesn't seem concerned about any potential subgenre ennui. "I think we were very much immune to that in the sense that we weren't a traditional superhero show," he says. "As you know, some people love multiverses, some people have come to hate them, but a lot of that noise didn't really bother us.

"We never said, 'Well, we shouldn't do this, or we can't do that because someone else did.' We sort of felt we were in our own little orbit, because we saw ourselves as this dysfunctional family show first and foremost. I think that sets us apart."

Besides, there's no doubt that *The Umbrella Academy*'s quirky, Wes Anderson-inspired sense of humour insulates the show from its superpowered competitors. Indeed, while it's never shied away from tackling important issues in a sensitive way – mental health, the US civil rights movement and transgender character Viktor's transition have all been part of the story – it's also consistently embraced the silliness of its premise.

> **"I feel like we got lucky with actors that so beautifully embody these characters"**

"There was nothing that was pitched that we thought we couldn't do," says Blackman, assuring *SFX* that no idea has ever been dismissed for being considered too out-there. "We were only limited by money or time, and I was proud that no pitch went unheard in the writers' room.

"Even when we came up with the idea of 'paradox psychosis', where if you're standing next to your doppelganger you'll start to sweat and fart, we just laughed in the room! I wanted to try such bizarro things but there were so many wonderful ideas that we just didn't have time to do everything."

The biggest challenge facing this final season is delivering a conclusion that makes the journey feel worthwhile – after all, there's no shortage of *Game Of Thrones* and *Lost* fans who could explain how a disappointing finale can sully the memory of all that's come before.

"Yeah, I felt a certain responsibility," Blackman admits, "but I knew how I wanted to

REOPENING THE UMBRELLA

Is season four really the end of the story?

Although there's currently no follow-up on the cards, Steve Blackman believes the *Umbrella Academy* universe could live on beyond the parent show. "I can think of a number of spin-offs off the top of my head that I would love to see," he says. "I hope this isn't the end of the Umbrella Academy, it's just so beloved, but we'll have to see where Netflix wants to go down that road. I think it's a world that could be spun off. There's so many interesting timelines and different characters we've met along the way that I think it's deserving of a spin-off one day. I really hope it's not the end of this."

Millie Davis as Claire gets grave with Allison.

Liisa Repo-Martell as Abigail (right).

Number Five (Aidan Gallagher) and Derek (Zack Binder).

Claire and Klaus (Robert Sheehan) have a stroll.

end the show from very beginning. We wanted to explain the Jennifer Incident [aka the death of original Umbrella Academy alumnus Ben], and to talk about [Sir Reginald] Hargreeves's origins. There will still be mysteries left, but I think the bigger ones are solved. I talked to Gerard Way the other day, and he was very satisfied with the way we did it. It may not match what he does, but I think he loves some of the things we did."

So what if time-hopping, teleporting Number Five had transported the 2019 incarnation of Blackman forward to 2024? How would he feel about the way the show's turned out?

"I feel like we got lucky with actors that so beautifully embody these characters, and I've gotten to just grow the characters as the actors grew with them," he says. "I deviated and made changes, of course, but it very much felt like an organic experience to me.

"If you'd asked me if there's anything else I could have done if I had five more episodes somewhere, I don't think so. I think we got to what I feel is a very natural ending, the right ending for the show. It's a surprise ending, but I think it's a good ending." ●

The Umbrella Academy is on Netflix from 8 August.

NUMBER SEVEN

Elliot Page
is Viktor Hargreeves

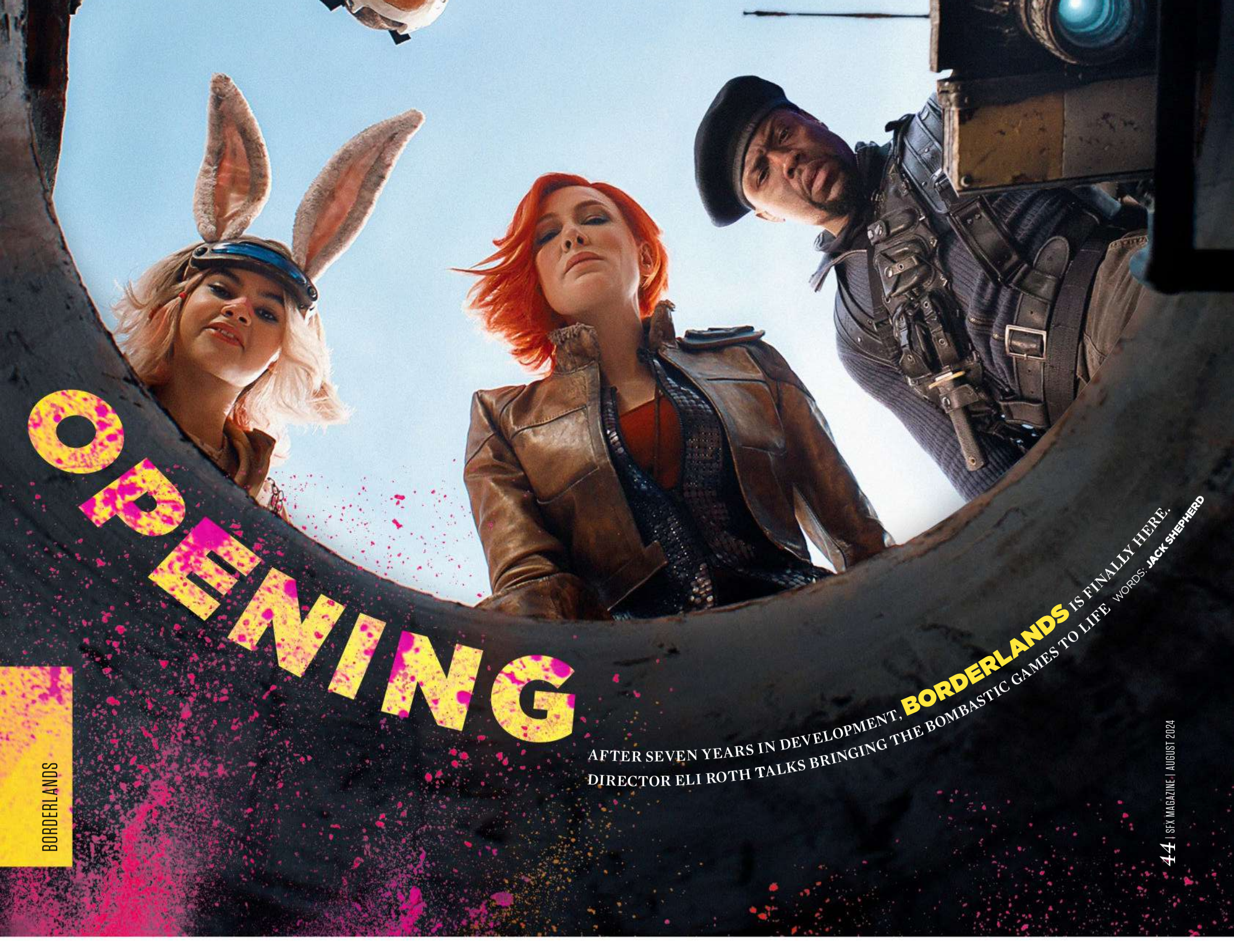
All four seasons of *The Umbrella Academy* have felt very different. Has each year felt like a new show?
● Yeah, I guess it does. Every season has sort of had its own unique qualities, environment and locations, and season four is definitely a sort of newish world they're venturing into.

Though every new season seems to take them back to square one...
● Yes, that seems to be their cycle, and where we find them at the start of this season, everyone's to a degree managed to find their way, but – in *Umbrella Academy* fashion – things go awry, and the family comes back together.

How's Viktor coping without his powers?
● I think Viktor is in a pretty good place. He's left his past behind, he's establishing his life and isn't having to contend with this internalised form which I would imagine would be pretty stressful, going about life and worrying about the consequences of this power and the past. I think he's definitely not minding being in a rhythm that feels like normalcy.

Do you think he has a different relationship to his abilities to the other Hargreeves?
● Every character has their own tension with their power or the difficulties it presents in their life. But I think with Viktor it was so immense, and so suppressed and repressed for so long, that there is just something inherently volatile about it – and that's obviously been proven.

How does Viktor feel about Allison after his sister killed Harlan in season three?
● We definitely sense tension, but also in a relatively early episode, Viktor says something along the lines of, "We don't get along, that's fine. We don't have to."



OPENING

AFTER SEVEN YEARS IN DEVELOPMENT, **BORDERLANDS** IS FINALLY HERE. DIRECTOR ELI ROTH TALKS BRINGING THE BOMBASTIC GAMES TO LIFE

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

PANDORA'S VAULT

Roland, Lilith, Dr Tannis, Krieg and Tiny Tina (front).

DOGS REALLY are man's best friend. Just ask Eli Roth, the director of *Hostel* and *Thanksgiving*, who has his French Bulldog to thank for landing the *Borderlands* gig.

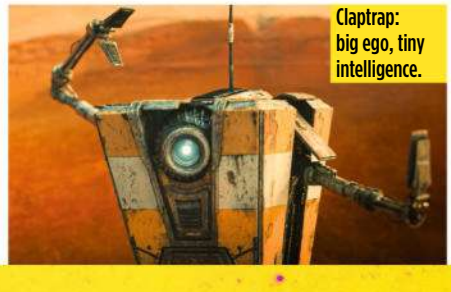
"Whenever I take her for a walk and she has to go to the bathroom, she won't let me look at her," Roth tells *SFX*. "I have to look away because she gets really shy. But one day I filmed her. She had that shy look on her face and I was like, 'That's Claptrap.'"

Claptrap, as anyone who has played the *Borderlands* videogames knows, is the player's fast-talking, intentionally annoying and hilarious robot companion. When Roth was first approached by Randy Pitchford, CEO of the games' developer Gearbox Software, he wanted to know more about the series' mascot.

"My first question was, 'You can't kill Claptrap, but you can shoot him hundreds of times?' He goes, 'Correct. Because there's a scene where Claptrap gets shot up after being a decoy'. I said, 'So what happens to the bullets?' Randy goes, 'I don't know.' I go, 'Could he shit out the bullets, like we're in a Mel Brooks movie?' He goes, 'Yes, he could.' And I felt we needed to see that."

Roth wanted Claptrap's expelling of bullets to come at a key moment in the movie – just as the lead characters, a rag-tag group of bounty hunters, are trying to escape a dangerous threat. "But rather than escape, they've got to deal with this robot that needs to expel the bullets," says Roth.

The filmmaker thought of his dog and filmed him going to the toilet, looking shy. "And that was my pitch to Lionsgate," he continues.



Claptrap: big ego, tiny intelligence.

"They were laughing so hard." Not only did this immortalise a dog's toilet habits, but it established the tone for what would become Roth's *Borderlands*.

"This is the movie where the robot gets shot, has to expel the bullets, and you're just watching our hero Cate Blanchett going, 'Is this really happening? I thought I was an action hero and he just hijacked my movie.' The absurdity of that. Then having Jack [Black, voice of Claptrap] milking that gag, that was the movie to me. I wanted Cate Blanchett as a pissed-off bounty hunter and Jack Black as this annoying robot."

It's not exactly far off the tone of the games: intergalactic Westerns brimming with humour and heart. Roth wanted to make sure that translated to the big screen, but also strove to make his film an "adaptation, not a recreation". That meant understanding everything about the game's world, set on the planet of Pandora. Once believed to be rich with mineral wealth, Pandora's visited by multiple corporations,

STOCK ART: TARA MOORE; MASTER1305/GETTY

Tiny Tina's backstory is actually horrifying.

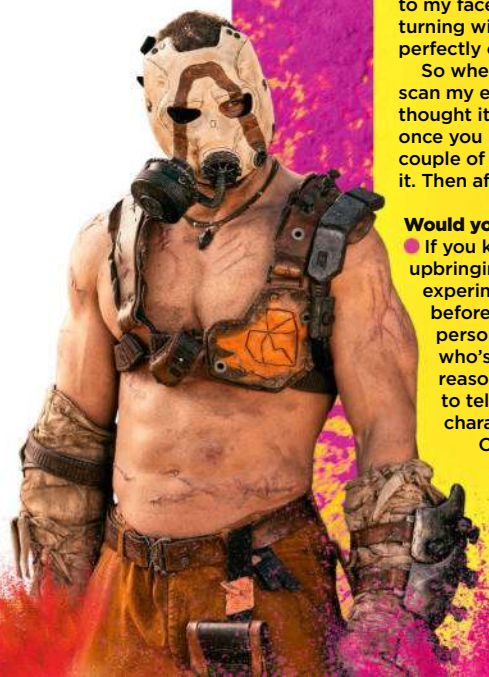
Director Eli Roth with some of his critics.

only for them to find little of value and abandon the planet. However, they all leave their workforce behind. Those who remain become scroungers and bandits, while rumours of alien artefacts hidden deep inside a secret vault spread like wildfire.

"It's a futuristic science fiction movie, but it's also a big, fun world that is totally insane and batshit crazy and bonkers," Roth says. "Those are the movies I love. When I was a kid, seeing *Star Wars*, that changed what I thought was possible.

"Then continuing with films like *Escape From New York* and *Mad Max: The Road Warrior*, and later on *The Fifth Element*. Every now and then a science fiction film will come along, and you just go, 'What planet is this from?' The imagination and the colours."

Roth plays games but does not describe himself as a gamer. He came to love *Borderlands* because of its ridiculousness, and found that Pitchford shared many of the same influences as him. "I definitely did not want →



THE MASKED BRAWLER

The actor behind Krieg's mask, Florian Munteanu, talks action on Pandora

What's your history with *Borderlands*?

● I have a history with gaming. I basically hung up the controller about 10 years ago, because gaming is very time-consuming. But I was familiar with *Borderlands* and very familiar with Krieg before I even read the script. I remember him being a lot of fun but very complex because of his split personality. When the audition landed on my table, I was excited reading the name *Borderlands* on the script. Then, talking to Eli about it, and him sending me some clips about Krieg, I was like, "That's my character."

In the games, he's a failed super-soldier experiment. How much of that do we see in the movie?

● In a game, we have endless hours to really explore each character. The movie doesn't have time to expand on all the storylines. But, without giving away spoilers, what I can tell you is that it's the same thing, you can tell that he was a skilled fighter before something happened.

For most of the movie, we don't really know why he is the way he is, because he comes across as a little strange, but throughout, because of him being with all the other heroes, you can tell that he has good intentions, he has a good heart. His connection to Tina is very strong because he is very protective over her. We dig a little bit deeper into the game version of the character by the end.

How would you describe the action scenes?

● I've seen the movie and I promise you there's not a single second where you can blink. It's pure action. It's pure violence. It's that craziness that the game has. Some people had doubts, and maybe I had those doubts too; like, how do you want to transmit that to the big screen? Because the game is the game. But man, this movie's just a hell of a ride once you get into your seat. When the movie starts, it's craziness from A to Z. I'm very happy with the result, and that comes from a gamer.

How was it wearing the mask?

● The mask made it tough, because the key for delivering great action scenes is control and a good view of your environment, and I didn't have that. We tried to work around that, to build a full mask that was adapted to my face, so when I was turning, the mask was basically turning with me, because it was a replication of my face perfectly on my face.

So when I turned, I still had the view that I needed to scan my environment. But it was way tougher than I thought it was going to be. But once you get used to it, once you have done a lot of prep beforehand – I had a couple of weeks training with the mask – you get used to it. Then after that, it becomes business as usual.

Would you return for a *Borderlands* sequel?

● If you know the game and the character, you know his upbringing and you're asking, "What were those experiments? What was he before? What was he like before he lost his sanity and developed a split personality?" Then we have the character Maya, who's very special to him in the games. She's the reason he does everything. There's a lot of story still to tell, not only with this character but every other character as well, and that's what I want to explore.

Once you become a character, it becomes a part of you. You don't want to get rid of that character too fast.

Cate Blanchett, Kevin Hart, Ariana Greenblatt, Florian Munteanu and Jamie Lee Curtis.

to reverse-engineer *Borderlands* back into the movies that influence it," Roth says. "But I understood the tone, I got it, it's completely my sense of humour. It's me laughing at Monty Python when the Black Knight's getting his arms and legs chopped off. But also there were elements of *Barbarella*, there were so many things that I knew I could put into this movie so that it's a big, fun, colourful, insane world."

Some of those things have proven controversial with the game's fanbase. People have been critical of the casting, particularly Blanchett as Lilith and Kevin Hart as stocky action hero Roland, two bounty hunters searching for the treasure-filled vault.

"My obligation is to the movie and to make the best movie possible," retorts Roth. "The trouble is, you're never going to recreate the experience of the game unless you're playing the game. My job is to adapt the story into the best movie story. Trust me, I'm well aware that people get pissed off. All you can do to satisfy them is definitely have those Easter eggs and those things from the game that are for those fans."

When you consider just how high the expectations are for anything related to *Borderlands*, it's no wonder that the movie has been in development since 2015, having gone through multiple writers and directors.

"We're making a movie for mainstream audiences," Roth continues. "If you're a *Borderlands* player, you're going to have fun with the movie, and you're going to go, 'They did a great job'. If you've never played the game before, and you see the movie, you're going to say, 'That was so much fun. I want to play the game.' The idea is to make a movie that appeals to everybody, but the only way you can do that is by making a great movie."

Roth points to something Pitchford told him: that it's similar to how Marvel adapts their comics to the screen. "The comics are the comics and the movies are the movies, and they follow their own mythology, and they follow their own story, and they have their rules," Roth explains. "It's going to take a minute for people to split them into two."

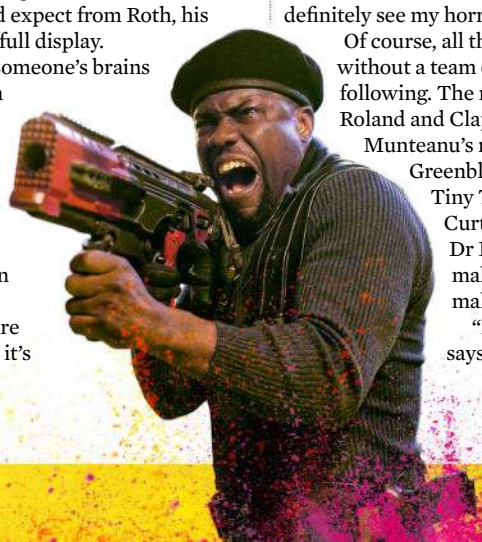
WORLD BUILDING

To forge this gigantic picture, Roth assembled a team of artists in Budapest capable of creating a bombastic otherworldly experience. "The whole art department's from *Dune*," he says. "They're incredible. I said, 'If we're going to make Claptrap, it's going to be a photorealistic Claptrap.' We can expand the worlds digitally but I wanted to build the main city of Sanctuary, I wanted to build an Outrunner [a dune buggy vehicle]. When it moves, it can be digital, but when Cate's in it, it's physical."

The creative team built giant rusted sets made to look almost post-apocalyptic and used both physical and digital trickery to give the film a unique look. Roth took inspiration from the way the speeders in the original *Star Wars* used mirrors to look like they are floating. "It was trying to look at the older versions of these effects and going, 'What is it about that world-building that is so tangible, and makes you feel part of it? How can we have something that looks and feels big?'"

And as you would expect from Roth, his horror roots are on full display. "Instead of having someone's brains splat out, we drive a truck through the head of a monster and the guts splat out, so it's monster guts instead of human guts," he says. "Then there's a sequence where the bandits are popping out, where it's all dark, almost like you're in a haunted house. It's a PG-13 fun science fiction movie, but you'll definitely see my horror influences in there."

> **"We took it seriously but didn't shy away from the absurd and totally ridiculous moments"**



Of course, all this would be for nothing without a team of characters worth following. The main misfits are Lilith, Roland and Claptrap, as well as Florian Munteanu's masked Krieg, Ariana Greenblatt's explosives-loving Tiny Tina, and Jamie Lee Curtis as a clearly insane Dr Patricia Tannis. They make for a joyously malfunctioning group.

"I love the characters," says Roth. "We have the best

Ariana Greenblatt as Tiny Tina: cute! Deadly!

Have the group found a fabled Vault at last?

cast I've ever worked with, and everybody just went for it. We took it seriously but didn't shy away from the absurd and totally ridiculous moments. And Tiny Tina really is the heart of the film."

Blanchett, best known for her roles in the Oscar-nominated *Tár* and *Carol*, as well as smaller roles in *Thor: Ragnarok* and *The Lord Of The Rings*, seems a surprising choice to lead an action sci-fi. "Cate and I bonded over our love of horror movies," Roth says. "When we first met, we talked about how much she loves *Evil Dead*. When I told Cate that I really wanted her to play this badass bounty hunter, like Clint Eastwood's Man with No Name or Snake Plissken, she said, 'You know *Escape From New York* is my favourite movie, right?' Of course it is."

They have a plan. Probably.

"When people look at Cate, they see her with the conductor's baton, I see her with a flamethrower," Roth continues. "Cate learned to twirl and shoot and roll over these stunt people while shooting them and stabbing them and turning around and flipping her hair out of the way and then shooting another one.

"It was hard. She has an amazing stunt team and a fantastic double, but Cate wanted to do as much as possible. It took this long, but seeing Cate as this badass action hero in this world of *Borderlands*, it's perfect."

Hart, too, has a surprising role in the movie. Best known as a comedian, the actor discussed with Roth how other comics – namely Eddie Murphy and Will Smith – transformed into action heroes. "I said that the only way we will do this is if we just show it," says Roth. "I said, 'I'm going to throw hundreds of people at you in an unbroken take, and you're just going to shoot them and fight them and take them out, and I want to see you doing it.' He's an amazing fighter. He makes it look like he really worked in the military. He was a finely-tuned killing machine. It's Kevin, so his humour is going to come out no matter what. That's naturally there."

If all goes well, we could see Blanchett, Hart and Claptrap head out on more adventures. "With multiple *Borderlands* games, there's so much in the world – it was very difficult to narrow it down just for this story," says Roth. "It took seven years to come up with a draft that everyone was happy with.

"So my feeling is, any time you start talking about the universe, you can get into trouble because you're not focusing on the movie you're making. But I do believe that there's so much there that, if the fans like it, and it sells, we would love to continue. They absolutely would continue." It might be time for Roth to take his dog on another walk.

Borderlands is in cinemas from 9 August.

HISTORY DEPLETING

CO-SHOWRUNNER IAIN MORRIS EXPLAINS HOW HE, JEMAINE CLEMENT AND TAIKA WAITITI BREATHED NEW LIFE INTO TIME BANDITS WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

GEN XERS GREW UP WITH SOME REALLY bizarre and dark films aimed right at their unsuspecting kid brains. There was a veritable smorgasbord of titles that caused nightmares and My First Existential Spiral, including *Watership Down* (1978), *Gremlins* (1984) and writer/director Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits* (1981).

Co-written with fellow Python Michael Palin, *Time Bandits* was an original story about 11-year-old schoolboy Kevin (Craig Warnock), an egghead obsessed with history and saddled with self-absorbed parents. When a gang of dwarves spill out of his bedroom wardrobe, Kevin discovers that his room is a time portal and he's compelled to follow them through time as they run from a giant, terrifying, disembodied head (Ralph Richardson) that's laying chase. See? Beyond weird.

Stacked with incredible actors like Sean Connery, Ian Holm and Shelley Duvall, *Time Bandits* was a critical and box office success that continues to rank in all-time lists of the best children's films and time travel films. There's been no sequel, so current generations have no idea how much this film both scarred their parents, and helped them to develop their cinematic taste. That being the case, bless Jemaine Clement (*Flight Of The Conchords*), Taika →

Kevin and his gang pitch up in another era.

> “It was us just trying to think what it would be like to be an outsider nowadays”

Waititi (*What We Do In The Shadows*) and Iain Morris (*The Inbetweeners*) for reimagining this strange premise for today’s kids (and their families) as a 10-episode Apple TV+ series.

A long-time collaborator with Clement and Waititi, co-showrunner Morris tells *SFX* that the idea to revisit *Time Bandits* as a streaming series came from production companies Anonymous Content, MRC Television and HandMade Films (who made the original). Knowing they needed a filmmaker who could retain the source work’s quirky tone and direct young actors, Waititi was approached. He then called Clement, who called Morris.

“Jemaine phoned me and said, ‘We might be doing this thing together. Would you be interested in doing this?’ Basically because he knew I was a history nerd,” Morris laughs. “Me and Jemaine have known each other for 20 years, and I don’t think we’ve even talked about history. But he’s like, ‘No, but you just kind of go on about it a lot.’ So, it was kind of a dream phone call, really.”

The trio wrote the pilot script via Zoom during the pandemic. Morris says the film’s voice and dry wit felt natural to reproduce because of their shared affinity for British comedy. “Those guys in New Zealand got a lot of British television so it felt very much like we were almost coming home in a way to be able to try and write in that Python-esque style, with silliness, while trying to get the emotion through as well,” he says. “It felt like we were all aligned, and it wasn’t that difficult.”

It didn’t hurt that all three keenly empathised with Kevin’s dilemma as the nerdy outsider. “Obviously, I was the coolest one. If you talk to them, they’ll agree with that,” Morris jokes.

“So it was us just trying to think what it would be like to be an outsider nowadays, but also what it is to be an enthusiast. One of the interesting things as a kid is that sometimes what’s seen as uncool is just enthusiasm. We wanted to say look at this enthusiastic kid who actually is kind of cool because he has this knowledge and enthusiasm. That’s something I’ve always felt, that there’s nothing to be ashamed of. Even if the people around you at the time don’t get it, whatever you have an enthusiasm for is a really brilliant thing to have in life.”

Time Bandits the series adheres quite closely to the film’s premise and initial setup, with a contemporary Kevin (Kal-El Tuck) flipping out over a visit to Woodhenge (Stonehenge’s less impressive neighbouring attraction) for his birthday, or happily painting historical miniatures alone for hours. His parents and older sister don’t get him at all, so when a group of adult thieves led by Penelope (Lisa Kudrow) fall out of his wardrobe and they’re followed by a three-faced disembodied head, Kevin decides to join them on their next time portal jump.

Lisa Kudrow (second from left) plays Penelope.

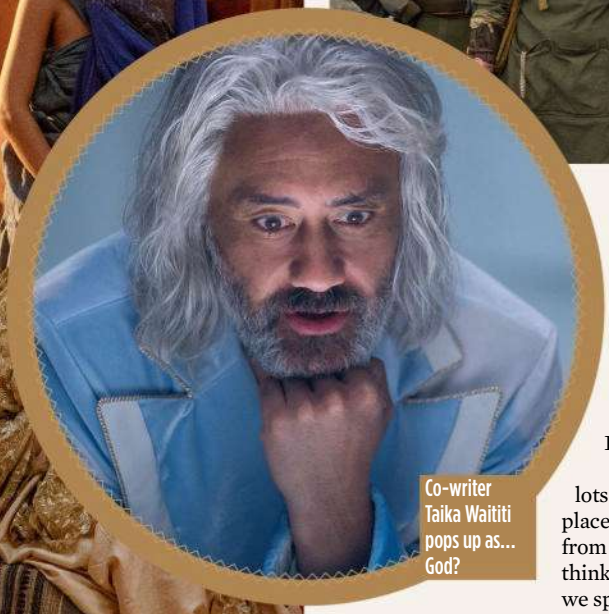
As with the film, for *Time Bandits* to work as a piece, its Kevin has to be able to shoulder the whole narrative on his back. To find their Kevin, Morris explains, they looked to the skills of casting director Des Hamilton, who cast Waititi’s *Jojo Rabbit*, who went out to schools and drama groups all over the UK to find about 100 candidates.

“There are lots of really, really good kids out there,” Morris says. “But there was something incredibly likeable and earnest, as well as being funny, about Kal-El. We just fell in love with him straight away, really. Again, it’s that sense of enthusiasm he had about things he could do. He wasn’t stepping back and being cynical, or being shy or weird. He was just like, ‘I’m here. This is me doing this stuff.’ That kind of energy carries it a long way.”

Not long after they cast Tuck, they went to Kudrow, whom the trio have long admired from *Friends* and *The Comeback*. As the de facto leader of the time travellers/thieves, Penelope starts out with a short fuse and not much of a plan, until Kevin’s big throughout time. Kudrow’s band of less than talented misfits includes characters played by Tadhg

STOCK ART: MAGICPICS, DIDECS/GETTY

"Hang on, is that the Battle of Agincourt?" "No."



Co-writer Taika Waititi pops up as... God?

Murphy, Roger Jean Nsengiyumva, Rune Temte and Charlyne Yi.

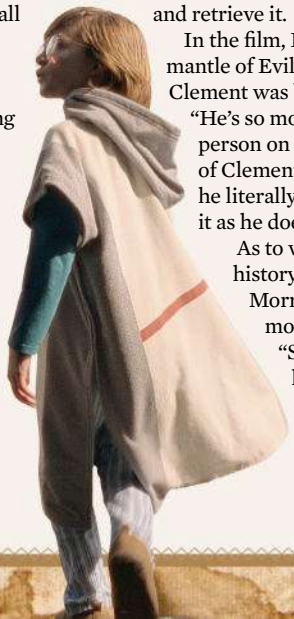
"We kind of wanted it to feel like they were useless but enthusiastic themselves," Morris says of their version of the band of thieves. "Kevin kind of gave them what they were missing. Certainly, Penelope and him give each other a bit of what they were missing and what they needed in their [regular] lives.

"In general, keeping that kind of pell-mell, rushing through and not really thinking through things properly. Where there's not too much time to stop to reflect, because if they did stop to reflect, maybe things aren't as good as they thought they were. That was the idea of them really, and making sure they all felt different.

"I think from the performances, and hopefully the writing, you'll feel that there's a slight sense of something missing with each of them," Morris continues. "They're all striving for something, and maybe they don't even know what it is. But they're striving for those things going forward, and they see in Kevin something of that."

Morris explains why they also moved away from Gilliam's choice to cast little people as the thieves. "We thought a lot about it," he says. "It wasn't a conscious effort to cast like the original, yet at the same time, it wasn't a conscious effort to *not* not cast like the original. We wanted to show we were going somewhere different with it at the end [of the season]. So we cast incredibly diverse and incredibly wide. We ended up on the people that we felt were the best people together."

The format of the series will have the gang portal-ing into all sorts of important civilisations and consequential moments throughout history in every episode. All the while, the Supreme Being follows, as well as the very peeved owner of that filched portal map, Evil (Clement). He sends out his bounty hunter, Fianna (Rachel House), to find them and retrieve it.



In the film, David Warner took on the mantle of Evil. In this, Morris says, Clement was bullied into taking the part. "He's so modest, but he's the funniest person on earth, I think," Morris says of Clement's acting work. "Honestly, he literally wanted other people to do it as he doesn't really rate himself."

As to where the gang ends up in history and how they portray it, Morris says he was keen to modernise the storytelling. "Since that film was made, we know a lot more about history: there's DNA testing, archaeology, and people just look at the world in different ways," he acknowledges. "This idea of history being written by the victors... we now look at different sources to see what was actually happening in different places. Obviously, even 40 years ago, there was a glut of western perspectives on the world. Now we know more about the other perspectives. It's a rich world to go through.

"I'm a history nerd and we talked about lots of different ideas to begin with, and places we sought to go," he continues. "Just from an entertainment point of view and thinking of variety. Then once we'd done that, we spoke to experts at each place, normally at least once but often two or three times, so that we were realistic."

Production designer Ra Vincent and costume designer Bob Buck went to what Morris says were "unbelievable lengths" to weave authenticity into every encounter with a historical figure or civilisation.

"Bob was finding etchings to show that the Assyrians dress like this, but the Trojans dress like this, and then he was having it made," Morris says. "We were doing a really deep historical dive in every single way we could to make it as real as possible. Then again, we cast people who were of those places."

Morris adds that they didn't take liberties with any historical facts because they did not want to do an unintentional *Back To The Future* with the show. "We kept on about the idea that Marty McFly invents rock and roll," he says of that film's history-changing plot point.

"We didn't want it to be that. We didn't want Kevin to go, 'I've invented this!' Or, 'I changed history in that way.' We want them to be interacting with the real history, rather than saying that this kid turned up and created all these things that these civilisations and cultures did."

While the film ended on an extremely bleak note, Morris says *Time Bandits* the series is open-ended, with the hope for more seasons. "We know where we want to go with it and we know the end point," he says. "We know what we want the last battle and philosophical ideas to be. It's just a question if people want us to spend a bit of time getting there."

Time Bandits is on Apple TV+ from 24 July.

Designing STAR TREK: DISCOVERY

BRINGING BACK CLASSIC ALIENS, READYING THE CREW FOR DESERT TERRAIN AND CREATING NEW STARFLEET UNIFORMS IS ALL IN A DAY'S WORK FOR *STAR TREK: DISCOVERY* COSTUME DESIGNER ANTHONY TRAN

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

THE ANTEDIANS

It starts with canon. Antedians had existed, they were like blue fish-heads with a giant kind of Christmas tinsel-y looking costume. I looked at the structure of that first and that shape that's so specific. How do we do that in a modern way? How do we use technology, now that we have 3D printing on our side and all these new materials?

So being inspired by aquatic life, being inspired by those original costumes, the first thing I looked at was Issey Miyake, a Japanese designer, and the pleating he did – so that skirt structure, the orb structure, we hand-pleated. We had a 65-person costume department that really was super, super talented, everyone had their own speciality. So they hand-pleated that costume. While it was pleated to basically gather the fabric, this giant massive fabric becomes this tiny strip that's gathered together tightly. Our textile artisans painted silver lines into it so when they opened it up, it looked like a fish spine. So that became the genesis for the skirt.

Our sculpt team made a bunch of clear, abstract different wave shapes that we stuck together. We put a little bit of glitter metallic paint on it that reflected that. The structure of it is all leather that's moulded on the body. We were trying to destroy the human form, because I think there's nothing worse than feeling like the head is alien but the body is so distinctly human. You want to take people out of their feeling like something is a prosthetic that's floating around on the human body.

So we played with building out the chest, and then building out the body. When you look at a fish sideways, there's a distinct curve and then there's this tail structure. So using the pleating as the tail, and then the structure of the leather as the fish shape, we definitely took the root inspiration and the colour palette from those original costumes.

The costume itself was silk. We try to think of our performers, but a lot of our background performers have been doing it since the beginning and so they're used to knowing how their body will breathe – or not breathe, rather – in neoprene and all that. That costume, because it was silk, I think was a little forgiving. That outer structure removed really easily, so in between takes we could liberate people. So he didn't have this giant mass on him. The person who played that actually was our fit model for the Breen too. So we really put him through the wringer!

The final assembled Antedian costume.

Fitting the various components to the model.

Trying out different looks for each piece of the puzzle.

Fitting Sonequa with her Q'mau costume.

Creating the look of the layered fabrics.

BURNHAM ON Q'MAU

The script basically denoted it was a tribe in a desert, so I think the references for that are pretty clear. Just from a practical perspective, when you look at the Tuareg, the Bedouin, all those desert nomadic tribes, they look fairly similar, because there's a necessity to weight. In terms of the heaviness of the fabric, in terms of the way things are draped practically to get sand out of your face, the goggles – all those things are pretty clear.

For me, it was about trying to put some more colour in this season. Original *Star Trek* is so colourful, and I feel like modern sci-fi in general wants to be sleek and modern, and I really wanted it to feel textural. So looking at the colour palettes when you're in a marketplace in India, looking at the hill tribes in Cambodia and Thailand and Vietnam – these are remote tribes in the jungle and their celebration of colour and their use of colour.

In terms of the hood, the shape of the garments, everything's raw silks, different textures, and all that trying to build depth. All of that was inspired by those desert nomadic tribes. The way they put textiles together and weave things together is so dimensional and interesting. So how do we do that in a 32nd-century way?

The main body shawl underneath the cloak.

It was a three- or four-step process where we had our base colour of fabric that we imported in, and we stripped the colour evenly so it became this crazy tie-dye. We dyed in another colour, and then we would print on top of it two different interwoven patterns, so it reads as textural depth. The idea for me was that if this planet is super sandy, and they're having all these desert storms, that the sand has beaten away some of the colour. At one point

Sonequa Martin-Green on set with her costume.

Anthony's original design for the head and "tail".

The special goggles Burnham gets to wear.

all these garments were probably solid colours, but it's been beaten away and stripped down.

You'll notice a lot of them had that hood and there's that banner in the back. Tunde [Olatunde Osunsanmi], who was directing that episode, was like, "On those sand racers, I want there to be something floating in the back." So for me that idea came that it was a kind of a banner with runic symbols. In traditional times they would have embroidered that on. We printed it on and then puffed it so it's this raised dimensional, slightly creepy effect that sits on top of the fabric, so that when they're in the sand racing, that thing billows behind them.

The goggles, we designed them and the prop department built them. It was the idea of twisting the shape of it and making it feel a little bit more low-profile, but at the same time tweaking the shape so it's a little bit of a trapezoid.

It is the future, so you don't want to get bogged down in terms of making it look like they're just in these nomadic costumes. So a lot of the hardware we use in terms of the belts and the tactical elements, we're trying to give it kind of a hardness next to all the softness of silk and cotton.

THE SELAY

Their costumes were pretty specific in terms of the colour – coppery bronze. The prosthetic head is obviously so big so you want something that matches the size of that. So the idea came about of making this extremely heavy cape structure. That is also formed leather. It's built onto a harness, secured like a seatbelt under that costume.

If you look at the original Selay costumes [from *TNG*], it's very triangular-shaped at the top. So the idea was the same – creating something that was very long and big on top and then really slimming it down, kind of like a cobra. The head is very, very big and the body gets very sinewy and long. It has this kind of medallion effect in the middle of it that's meant to be like an exoskeleton that we had 3D printed over three times. Then we sculpted the piece out, and eventually formed it to the body.

If you look at the two side by side, the original costumes and this one, they definitely are the same thing. But knowing that we were just so much further into the future, how we made it was just different.

We found this fabric that was perfect for [the cape], it felt a lot like scales. The way I had them drape it, where it was stacked – it's very, very stiff, it has no hang. Then on top of that we shellacked it, for want of a better word. That's why it looks scaly because we essentially applied a layer of semi-gloss over the entire thing to give it a really alien feel.

The tunic is made of silk, the structure is raw leather. That cape fabric is polyester – it just really looks expensive in the way that it was created. The body of it, that exoskeleton, is 3D-printed.

Anthony Tran's concept drawing for the Selay.

An actor patiently posing for fitting.

Front and back views of the finished costume.

Various fabrics used as part of the design for detail.

David Ajala, Sonequa Martin-Green and Sawandi Wilson in ep 10.

Burnham's *future* future uniform. Snazzy!

Sawandi Wilson as Captain Leto in his cossie.

STARFLEET FUTURE UNIFORMS

That's the most future-forward we've seen a *Star Trek* uniform. Starfleet uniforms are obviously uniforms so there's a regimented element to them – colour, shapes, silhouette – that they're all variations on a theme. So how do you make that feel more future than the future and then the future of the future? For me, the interest became, how are we going to put this costume together?

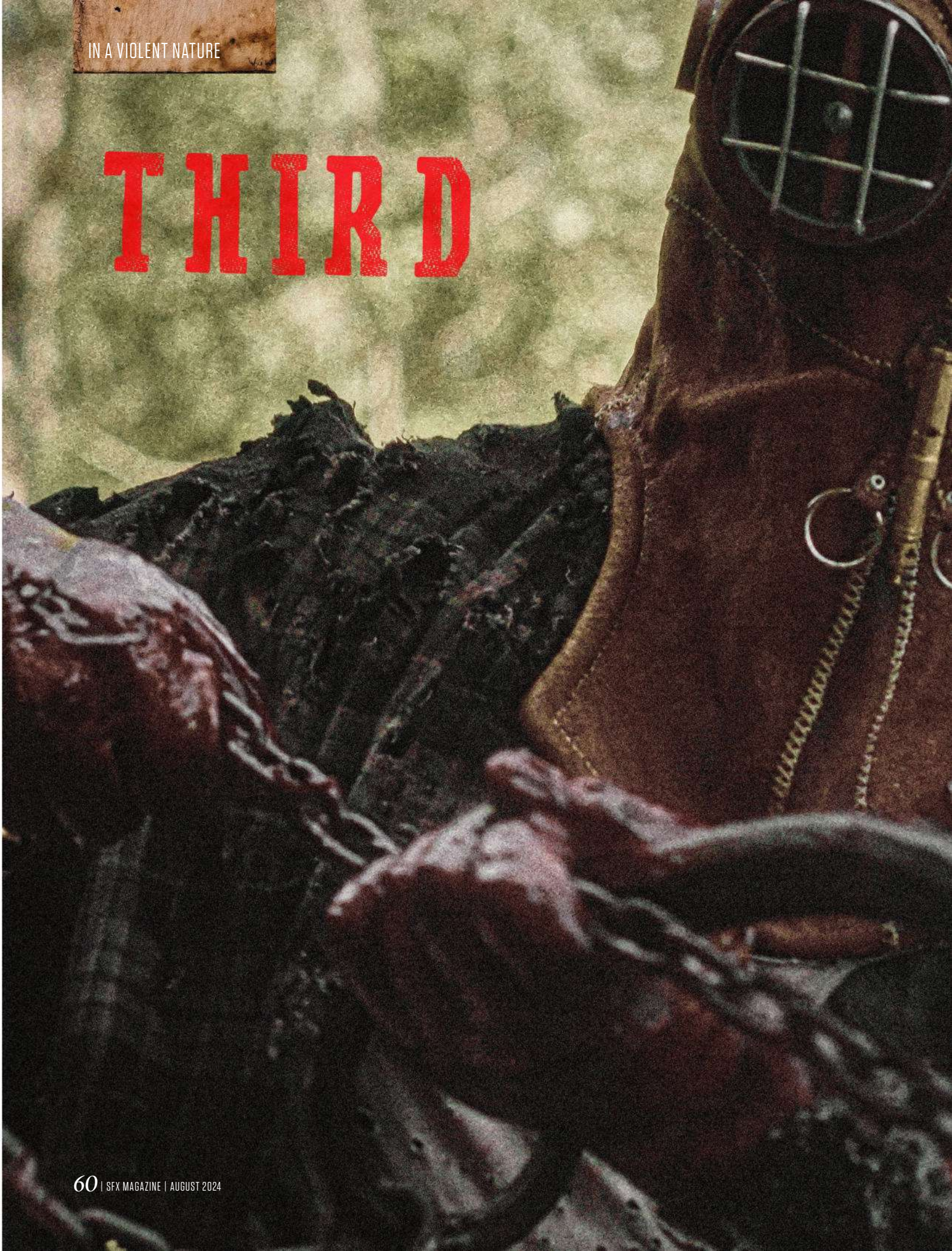
The colours are relatively the same. Obviously we came up with a new shade of red, a new shade of grey, a new shade of black, but the colouring is what it is. The way we put it together is different. Traditionally you sew seams, two pieces together, you sew it and you fold it out and there's your seam. The way we did it here was we sewed everything on top of each other. So if you watch it, it feels like this kind of a graduating shape to everything and it feels a little bit more hard.

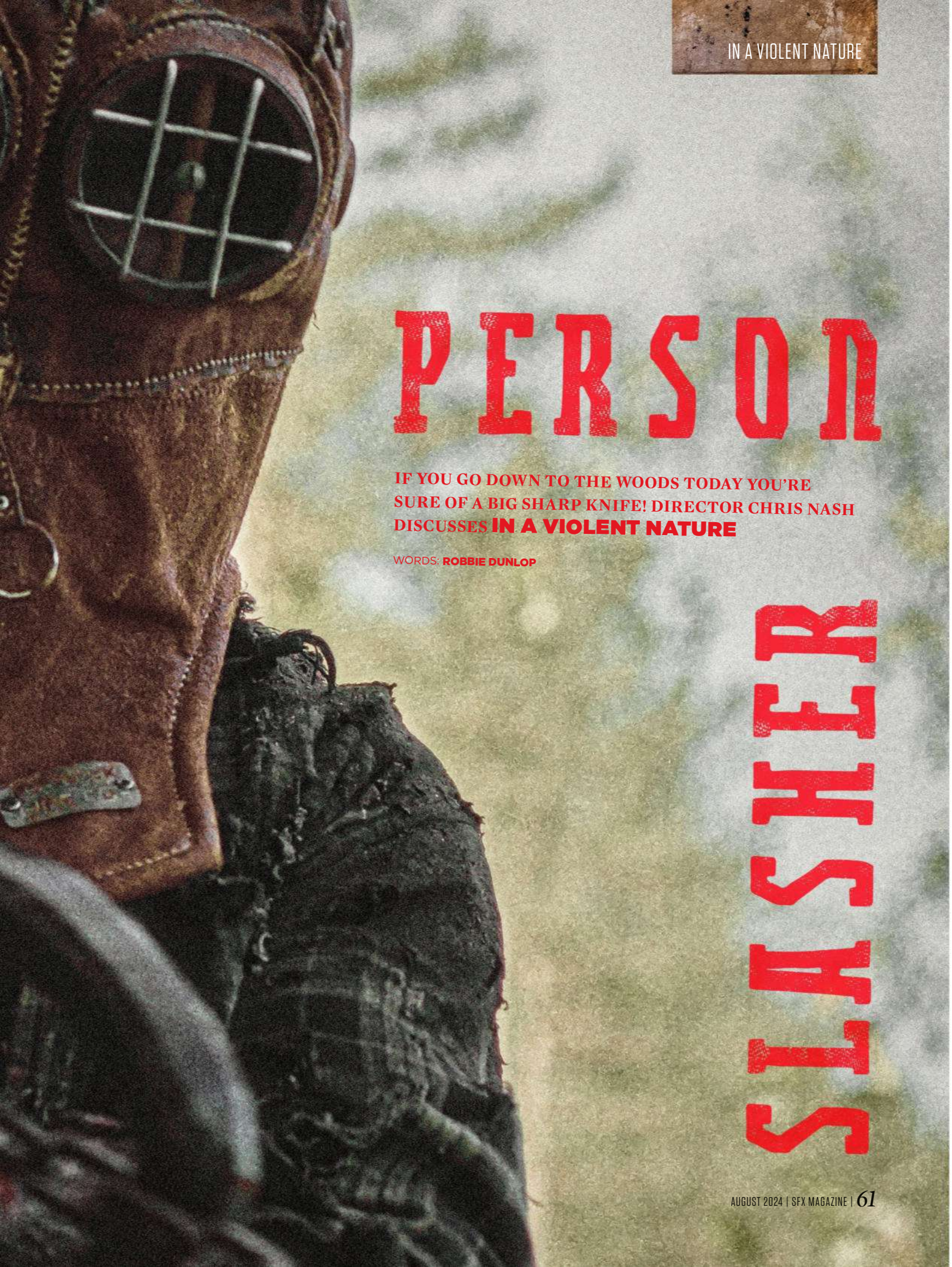
So that became the way we got into the language of how we were putting these costumes together. That's reflected in both Burnham's costume and her son's, even though they're obviously two different ranks.

My favourite *Star Trek* uniforms are the *Wrath Of Khan* red uniforms and then the *TNG* jumpsuit, which is probably my favourite *favourite* uniform. So Burnham's costume became inspired by the *Wrath Of Khan* uniforms and his was inspired by *TNG*, just in terms of the way we laid out the colour mapping – my own idea of where we're going to put that, obviously, with our own twist. She has a laser-cut belt that has the Starfleet insignia all over it.

Star Trek: Discovery is on Paramount+ and releasing on Blu-ray and DVD in August.

THIRD

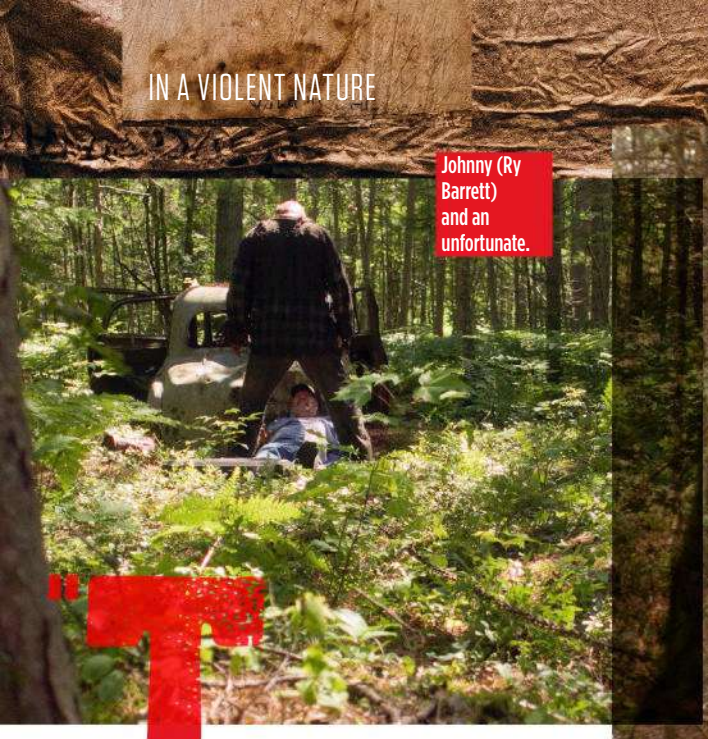




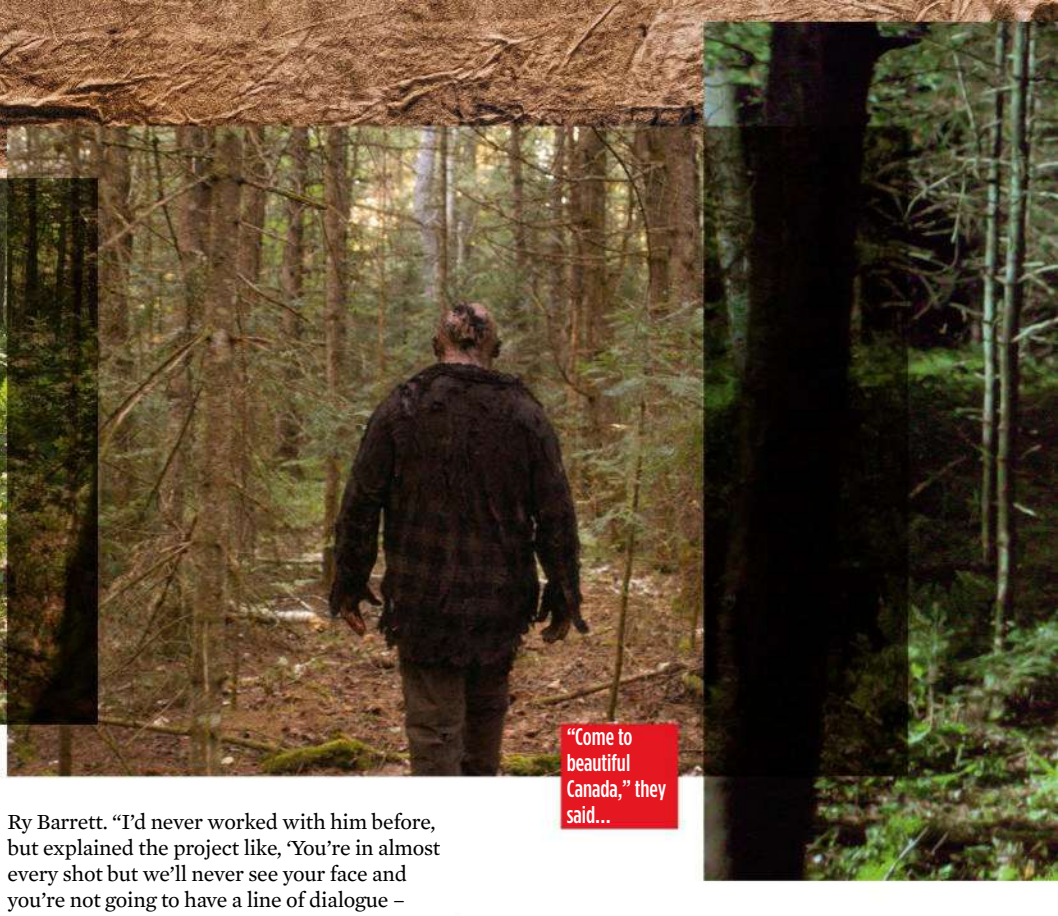
PERSON SLASHER

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY YOU'RE SURE OF A BIG SHARP KNIFE! DIRECTOR CHRIS NASH DISCUSSES IN A VIOLENT NATURE

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**



Johnny (Ry Barrett) and an unfortunate.



"Come to beautiful Canada," they said...

"THE STARTING POINT WAS ALWAYS a slasher film from the killer's perspective," says Chris Nash, whose debut directorial feature *In A Violent Nature* considers horror from another point of view.

When developing his innovative concept, he took inspiration from arthouse cinema, particularly the work of director Gus Van Sant, whose approach on films such as *Gerry*, *Elephant* and *Last Days* was to "stick to the lead character and let them tell the story at their own pace".

"I wanted to do it in horror, and slasher just seemed right," Nash explains. "Slashers walk at their own pace, and they set their own time. Also, it just felt like there hadn't been anything somewhat outside the box in slasher movies for a while, so it just seemed ready for it."

Johnny is the relentless serial killer whose head (at least the back of it) and hulking figure we'll come to know intimately. He and the backwoods setting – complete with lake and cabins – are directly influenced by the slasher flicks Nash watched as a youth, including *Friday The 13th*, *My Bloody Valentine* and *The Burning*. "They all live in your brain," he says.

In a further nod to the video era, the film's aspect ratio of 1:37:1 (a little wider than square) was chosen to recreate his experience of watching VHS tapes on '80s-period televisions. "Happenstantially, it's also the ratio Van Sant used for his films, so it kinda worked out in parallel," he notes. "But it was really just how we watched slashers growing up."

THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK

Within this realm of familiarity, however, Nash has crafted something unique. Third person shooters come to mind when watching elongated sequences of Johnny walking steadfastly and determinedly through tranquil forests. Leaves rustle with his footsteps and the wind blows, while birds chirrup in a deceptively serene nature. It's hypnotic.

Behind the mask is "staple of the Toronto drama scene and very accomplished actor", Ry Barrett. "I'd never worked with him before, but explained the project like, 'You're in almost every shot but we'll never see your face and you're not going to have a line of dialogue – and it's going to be an entirely physical performance.' But he was very intrigued and came on board.

"We watched a few films for reference and did some tests to see what the right way for him to move in front of the camera would be. He told me afterwards he watched animal attack videos online to prepare himself, to see how animals stalked their prey. I didn't know this till later, but watching it with that in mind it's like, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. It's a very slow, deliberate walk, but then at the end there's a burst of energy."

In homage to a thousand movie maniacs before him, Johnny wears a mask. Nash tells *SFX* that the look was inspired by masks worn by late 19th century firefighters. "It's a leather design that fits over the head and there's a little strap on the back – it's prominent in the film because we're behind Johnny for so long. An oxygen canister would hang off that strap and go into the helmet for air to circulate as firefighters looked for survivors in burning buildings.

"I saw it on a Cracked.com article in the late noughties, a long time ago. I always thought it was terrifying. The fact that it was supposed to be the mask of a hero was even more terrifying to me. So I logged it in my brain, knowing that if I was ever going to do anything that was kind of a slasher film, I was going to bring it back. It definitely does the job."

Shooting from the killer's point of view inevitably posed some challenges for the filmmakers. "We knew that having a protagonist who doesn't speak, his face enshrouded the entire film – whether it's in a mask or in shadow – we were going to have limitations on us to tell a full, cohesive story," Nash says. "So, it was going to be very, very simple. He has this MacGuffin taken and he wants it back." Nash is referring to a locket that some campers find hanging on the remains of a fire tower. Its theft triggers the resurrection of old Johnny, who is buried in the wooded grounds below.

The director says that with the camera always favouring the killer, "we knew we weren't going to be able to explore the side characters. We knew that even in reviews, and

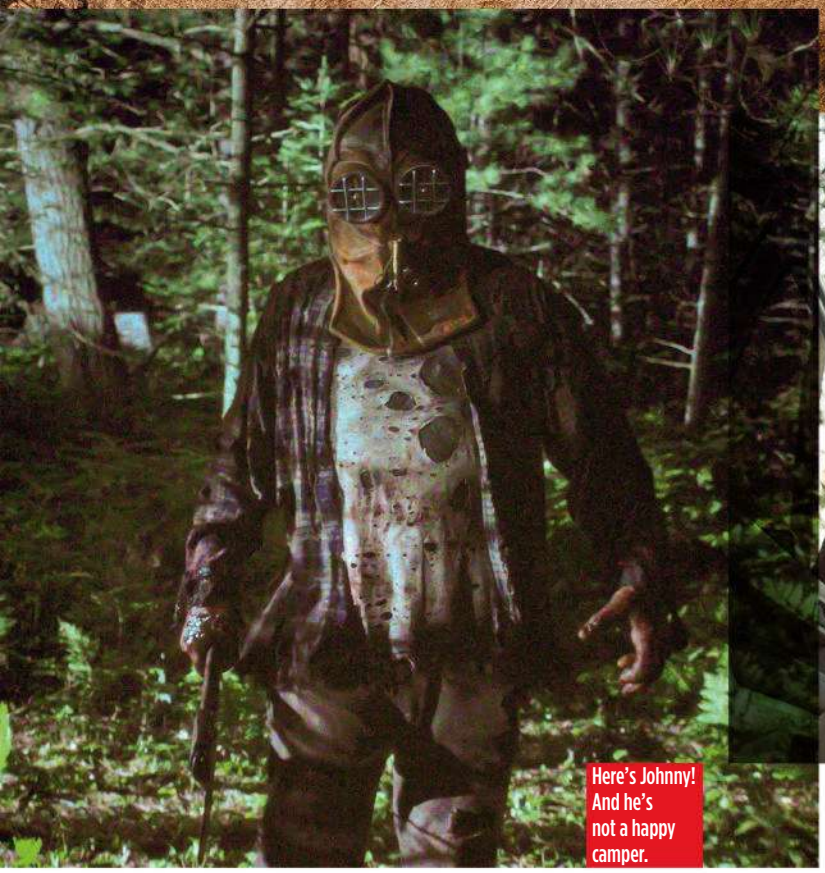
SOUND OF SILENCE

The director on the lack of music

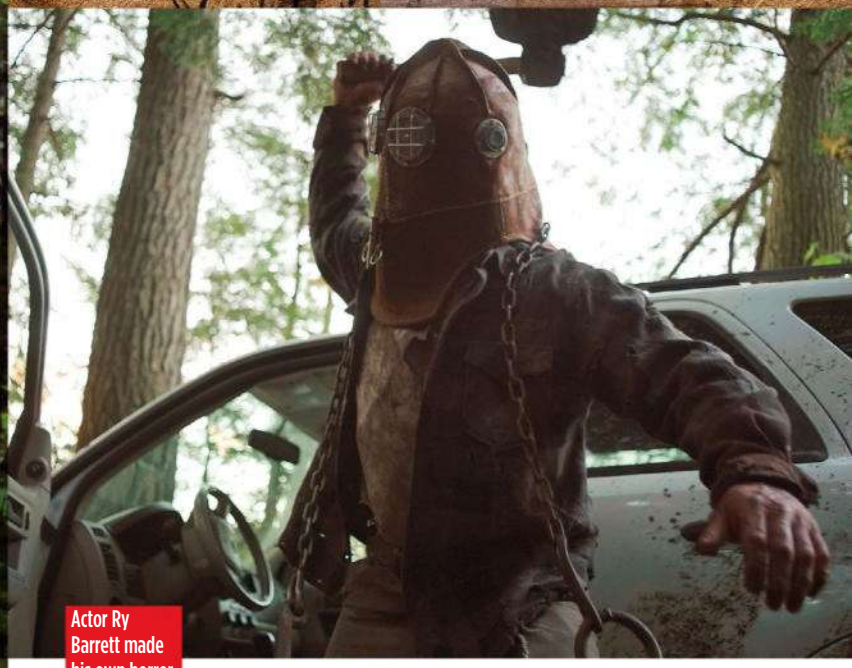
"Of course we were doubting ourselves at some points in time, but I never wanted to have a score for this film," says Nash of one of his stylistic choices. "Music itself is such an immediate manipulation of feelings. Nothing gets me to a specific emotional point, whether it's melancholy or sadness or hopefulness or just happiness, than music.

"I wanted this to be a very objective film. I wanted this to be something that when audiences experience it, they couldn't feel manipulated by it; they had to sit back and be a voyeur as to what is happening and project their own feelings onto it. With that in mind, we decided early on that we were going to let the environment itself *be* the score and not try to manipulate anybody into a certain feeling.

"Our sound designers Michelle [Hwu] and Tim [Atkins] really blew us away," he adds. "They added such a layer of life to the footage that really lets everything breathe. That was always the intent."



Here's Johnny! And he's not a happy camper.



Actor Ry Barrett made his own horror in 2002.

"He told me afterwards he watched animal attack videos online to prepare himself"

even in some criticism, we were going to hear, like, 'Oh, these characters are underdeveloped.' We knew that. We knew that they were going to be intrinsically underdeveloped if we were going to stick to this conceit."

Sticking to these rules did, however, benefit the filmmakers in other ways; for one thing, they had free range aesthetically.

"Pierce Derks, my cinematographer, and I were looking for the most appealing way to show this visually, rather than going for actual straight-up horror and suspense. Because we knew that following the character, we weren't going to have a lot of suspense; you were going to know what was happening the entire time."

The campers may well be "cannon fodder", but one of their number, Ehren (Sam Roulston), has the crucial role of recounting Johnny's death to the others. Nash dubs it his *Friday The 13th Part II* moment.

"There's something about characters telling stories to each other, in film, that I love," he says, "where we don't see any flashbacks, we don't see any recreations; we just hear the characters' words. It was very important to me to at least have some story that the characters themselves could latch on to. Just so they know when they're being killed: 'Oh, this is the guy from the story.' Just that one little flash of realisation before they die."

Talking of death, Nash hopes that some of the ways in which Johnny dispatches his victims will be new to audiences. "Or at the very least, they won't have seen them shot in the same way. Even if we're doing something that is very much like a homage to another death scene, we try and put a spin on it – like, they haven't seen it like this before or they haven't seen it go on this long."

Nash has a background in special effects and was part of the team that created the fantastical creatures in *The Void* and *Psycho Goreman*. Did his experience with prosthetics inspire Johnny's kills? "Oh absolutely," he replies. "While I was writing, I knew that, due to the nature of the film and how we're going to have an experimental thesis, they had to be memorable.

"I've worked on other projects where they just want gags [in the sense of a practical special effect device that releases fake blood]. We build the gags, and they shoot them in a way that's not as effective as they could be. So, knowing how I was going to shoot things as I was writing them and knowing what we could pull off helped tremendously."

His expertise also provided foresight into how long effect shots take to capture, allowing him to devote the right amount of set-up time. "A huge hindrance for anybody in the prosthetics field is working for weeks and weeks on gags.

"You get to the set and you're ready to go, and then you find out, because of production problems that are always going to happen, that you don't get to the gag until the very last five minutes of the day.

"You have to nail it on the first take, and you have no time to work anything out. Directing and writing and caring about the prosthetics, we gave ourselves the time to actually make everything look and feel as it should."

This is not a movie for fans of outdoor yoga. Or indeed, log splitters. "That was where everything kinda came together for us," Nash says of the last full scene that was filmed, where it isn't just logs being split...

On some days (he goes back and forth) it's his favourite kill. "I was much more confident at that point in time. Building a log splitter out of wood and cardboard, using an old snow blower and having our dummy all rigged up to be dispatched. Everything seemed to flow."

A meeting between a camper and Johnny's axe is another of Nash's bloody highlights. "I mean, it's simple," he says "but it's gory and it's goofy and it's a lot more fun in a Peter Jackson kinda way that I just really like. I feel like the joke seems to work. I love that one too. Those are probably my two favourites."

In A Violent Nature premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January, going on to become North American distributor ITC Films' widest theatrical release to date. In the wake of this success and a positive audience response, Nash is now considering where he might take a sequel.

"Don't try and reinvent anything; don't try and subvert expectations or antagonise an audience too much but look at something from a slightly different direction," he says. "And we realise that the whole playground is so fruitful for us to do that."

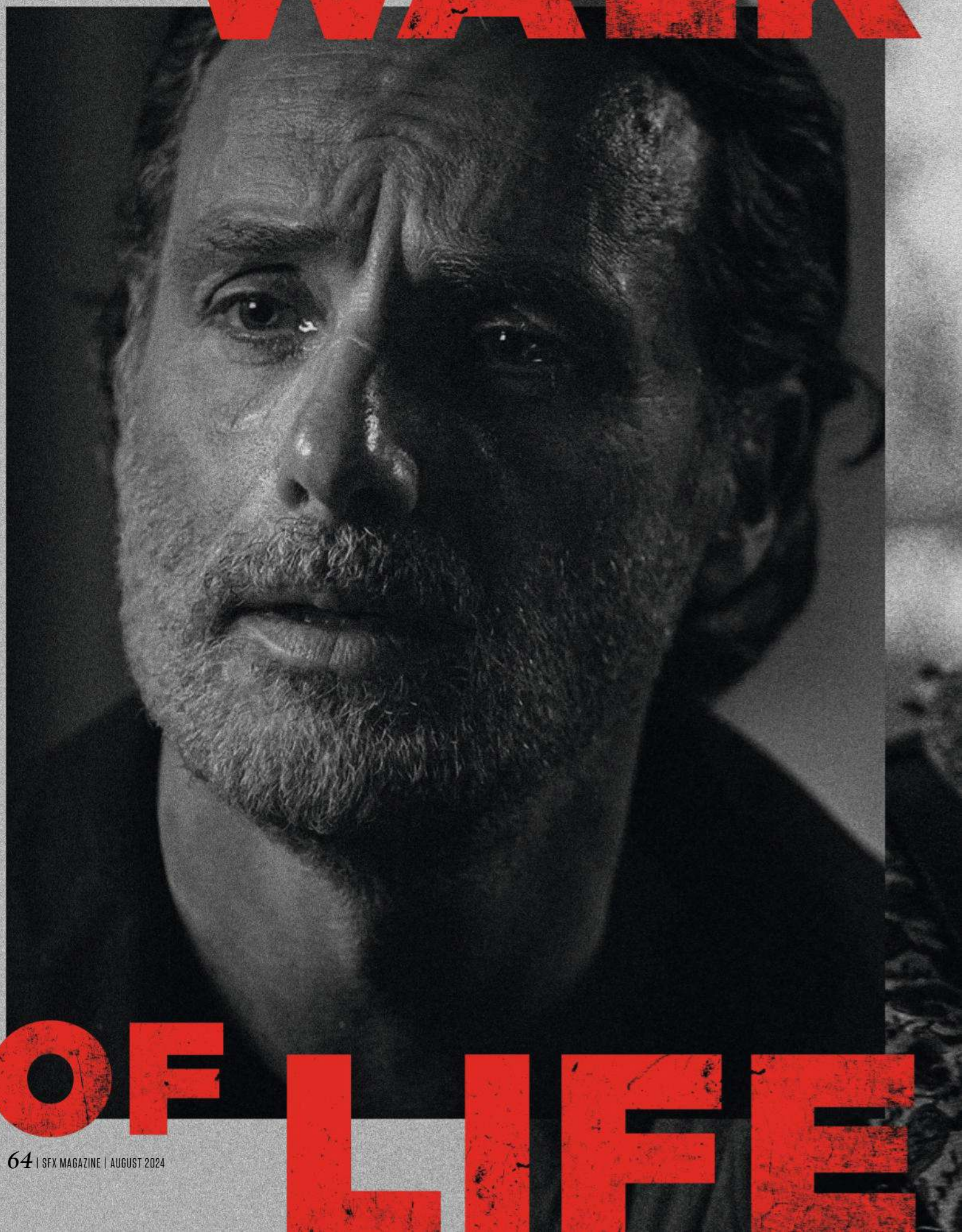
It looks like Johnny is here to slay...

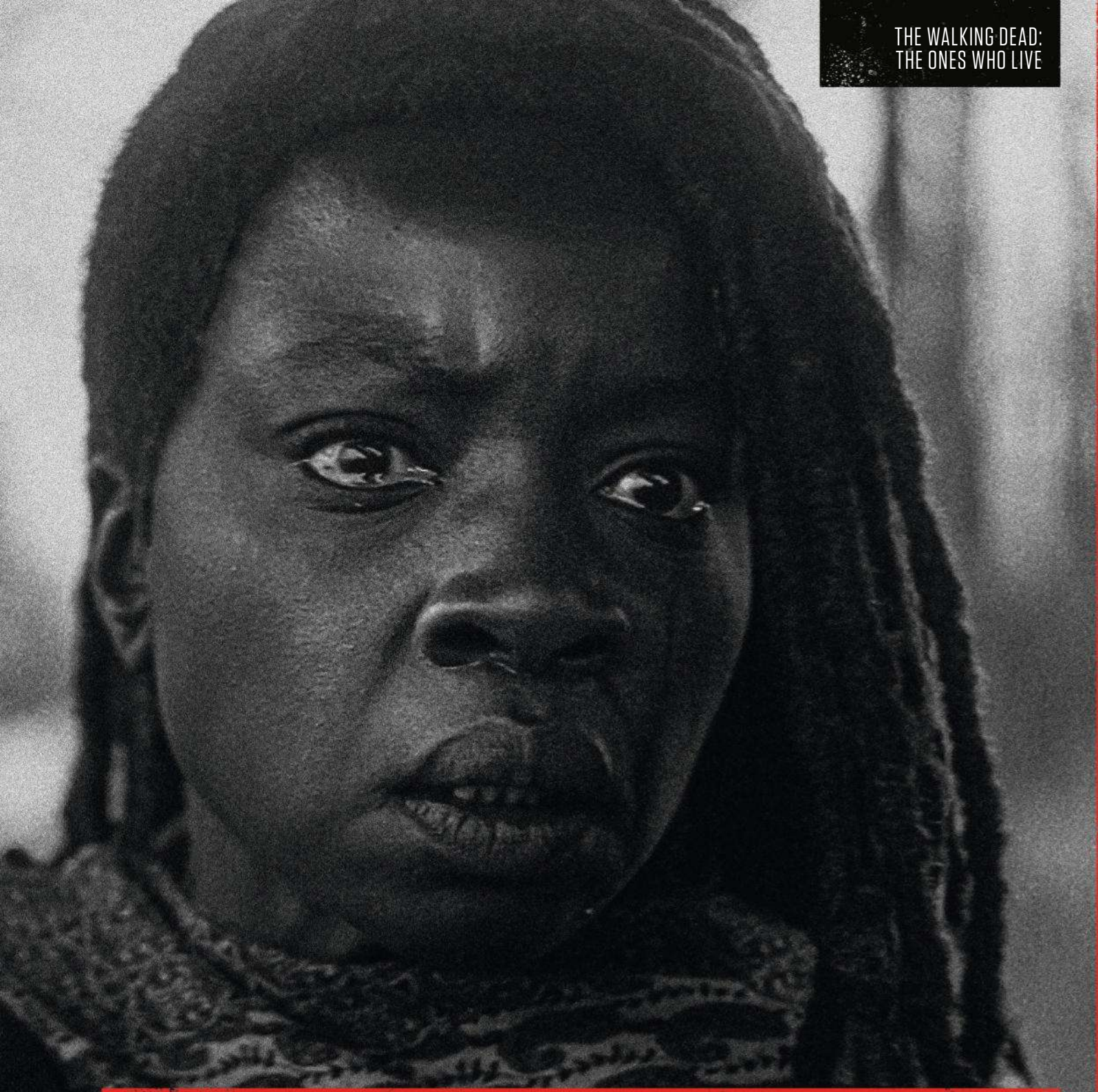
In A Violent Nature is in cinemas from 12 July.

STOCK ART: NEUEVECTOR, REAL444/GETTY

THE WALKING DEAD: THE ONES WHO LIVE

WALK OF LIFE





AS RICK AND MICHONNE RETURN IN **THE ONES WHO LIVE**, ANDREW LINCOLN AND DANAI GURIRA REFLECT ON THEIR JOURNEY WITH **THE WALKING DEAD**

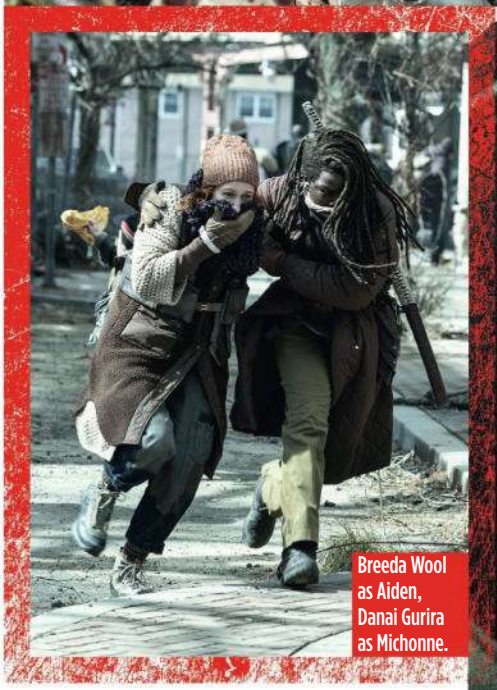
WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

What was it like beginning your *Walking Dead* experience?

AL: I just didn't want to be fired. Because I was a Brit and I just was like, "Why have they got me in the middle of this iconic series?" Frank Darabont, he wrote [screenplays for] *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile*, but also penned the first two series and directed the pilot episode. So two and a half weeks into the filming he came over to me and he just whispered quietly, "I think we might have something here." For him to say that, I thought we might be okay. It was the first [San Diego] Comic-Con when we launched. We showed the first trailer. I remember the reaction to, I think it was Rick on the horse coming down the highway. I heard the walls in Hall H reverberating. I was feeling sick outside before coming on. I thought we must be doing something right.

When I rode that horse in the first season, we had a weekend and we shut down four blocks of Atlanta and turned over tanks and whatnot, and had 500 extras chasing me as zombies. I just thought, "This is the coolest gig I have ever been in. What is happening?" →

Just because you're dead doesn't mean style dies too.



Breeda Wool as Aiden, Danai Gurira as Michonne.

DG: It was an unexpected thing. I definitely wasn't into horror. But when I watched *The Walking Dead* for the first time, I was amazed by the depth of the storytelling, characters – just how beautifully it was put together, I loved feeling the power and the energy of the actors, it felt like they were throwing their all into it. As a thespian, I love that. Those are my people. That's my tribe right there. So it really felt right for me.

Definitely stepping into it was daunting, it was already a massive, massive hit and the character was a huge, huge part of the comic books. And she had her own journey in the comic books., I was like, "Are we going to do this? Oh my god..." So it was all very exciting and scary, and then I had to learn how to use a katana. So it was a lot. But I was very embraced from the jump. I felt like I was on solid ground and then felt very much like I had a new family. That's the biggest blessing of it all.

What's it like coming face to face with the dead?

DG: I started really getting into [Greg] Nicotero's work. I was just so amazed being in his massive workshop, by what they do in there, what they create, because those zombies look so full of pain and anguish. They weren't just, "Oh, it's a zombie". Like the bicycle girl in the first episode – that was the quintessential moment where you knew this isn't just horror, this is human. This is a human show on another level. So then I started to get into zombies, and then I couldn't get scared any more because I was just too behind the scenes.

AL: The genius of KNB, Greg's company, and all these wonderful artists is that they make practical gags [effects]. That was always the most exciting thing about the show. They would make it effortless. They would make something that was a practical gag that freaked you out, that you could even stab and gore would come over you. There was no acting requirement.

Originally *The Ones Who Live* was planned to be a series of movies. Do you think this version was a better idea?

AL: It's a difficult thing to answer because it's about time, it's about the opportunity. Six hours felt like the minimum amount of time – because bear in mind we had to cover quite a long distance of time, to join these two timeframes.

We had to catch up with where Rick's been and where Michonne has been, and then collide them in the show, and also hopefully tell a bigger story about what's happening, what the grown-ups have been doing in the wider world, while we've been trying to survive in the dirt for nine, 10 years. So it was just a matter of what's the most effective way to tell this story, and six hours felt the bare minimum of what we needed. I don't think three movies over 15 years to tell a similar story would have been as effective.

> "I chop my hand off, which I've been campaigning for"

Was it different when you returned?

DG: We were the co-creators and the executive producers. So me, Andy, [Scott M] Gimple and Denise [Huth], we basically hired everyone. We did all the casting, we auditioned people on Zoom. We did a *lot*. We did it all, we built the house. So we weren't seeing it done in any different way because we were doing it. If anything, grappling with budget, that was the newest thing for me.

AL: We weren't in Atlanta, we were in New Jersey. So we built all of it, we got the team back. Fortunately, we had heads of department that we'd taken from the mothership. So there were lots of key people in design, costume, that were very au fait with the sense of the show, but we also wanted to do something different. So we got a new camera team and new director of photography, just to make it look different. We just wanted to keep changing it up. Let's do it different, let's put Rick in a different place. We wanted to collapse the hero – at the beginning, you find a man defeated.

Was there anything specific you wanted for your characters?

AL: Well, I chop my hand off, which I've been campaigning for for quite some time. [Rick loses his hand in issue 28 of the comics.] It helps if you're a producer to get that past the post. Then as soon as I did it – worst mistake I ever made! [Laughs] It was a bloody nightmare.

But we wanted to do it, because we wanted to tell the story, very quickly, of the lengths he went to to try and return home, and the love that he had, and what he was willing to do. So in order to condense – talking about time again, and how little time we relatively had to tell a much bigger story – that felt like a very effective way of distilling the essence of his desire to return.

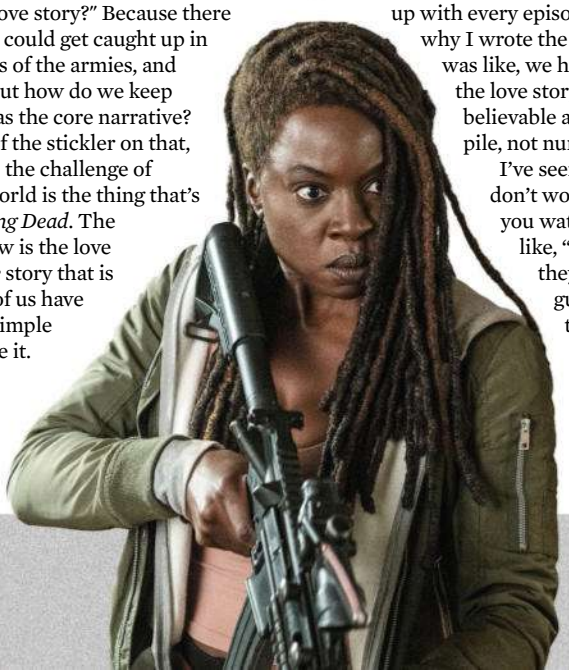
Bullet time: Andrew Lincoln as Rick Grimes.

Michonne Grimes and the horse she rode in on.

DG: The guy is thinking about his hand, but the woman is thinking about the whole, in the sense that how do we make a love story in *this* world, because it's new. So my mantra was, "Where's the love story?" Because there were times we could get caught up in all these details of the armies, and this and this, but how do we keep the love story as the core narrative?

I was kind of the stickler on that, because to me, the challenge of doing a new world is the thing that's new for *Walking Dead*. The thing that's new is the love story being *the* story that is unseen, none of us have ever done it. Gimple had never done it. So how do we make sure we're true to that, and not having it fall by the wayside and making it about all these other things?

It was the litmus test, the test I always took us through with every single scenario we came up with every episode. It's also kind of why I wrote the episode I wrote. I was like, we have to make sure that the love story is tangible and believable and at the top of the pile, not number three or four. I've seen the love stories that don't work, the ones where you watch them and you're like, "Meh, I could take it, they love each other. I guess they told me that..." So how do we *infuse* a love story where people *feel* the love story, but they also *feel* all the elements of what makes *The Walking Dead*? That was my big thing.



AL: It was just the love story, that intimacy, their relationship sort of unlocks all of this trauma that he's had to subdue for so long, because in order to live on, he'd sort of become a ghost in his own existence. That was, for me, a really interesting place to discover: that sort of "can't bear to look but has to look" kind of struggle, and the redemptive power of love. I'm a sucker for love stories. What else is there?

Is there anything else you'd consider doing in the *Walking Dead* Universe?

DG: I was just joking around about having a *Walking Dead* musical on Broadway! Me and Gimple are *actually* chatting about it, which is ridiculous. But he's just said we don't have the rights to it. I'm like, "Well, let's talk to Kirkman, see what he says to that."

I mean, we're really largely just joking around. But stranger things have been done. And I do love the theatre... It's about, how do you confine it to something? Because it's just so much story. So it would really be, how do you confine it to a good two- and three-hour play?

What about returning as your characters?

DG: Well, one cannot say because then one is spoilering, which one knows, one cannot do in this franchise. So yes, I *cannot* respond to that. But I'm very satisfied with where they have progressed to.

AL: This, for me, felt that we could comfortably say that that's done. That's a reunion; that's the perfect iteration of a story that I thought wasn't gonna happen for a time, and then Danai and Scott both said, "We need to reunite, we've got to do an epic love story."

And I went, "That's a great idea – and let's tell the story of the CRM and do what the grown-ups have been doing" and maybe some filling in, because I love all of that. I'm a bit of a geek for all of the mythology and what's going on, what's been happening.

So the short answer is never say never. Because if there's a good enough place to put Rick in, that we haven't seen before, there are characters out in the universe that I would *love* to act with again. But it has to be a really, really, really good story.

The Walking Dead: The Ones Who Live is on Sky and NOW.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

CHINA MIÉVILLE

A giant of 2000s genre fiction returns with a famous friend in tow

Words by Will Salmon /// Portrait by Barney Cokeliss

THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT CHINA MIÉVILLE'S work helped define genre fiction at the turn of the century. Although not his first novel, 2000's *Perdido Street Station* combined dark fantasy, socialist politics and richly detailed world-building to stunning effect. It won both the British Fantasy and Arthur C Clarke Award in 2001 and spawned a pair of equally excellent sort-of-sequels, *The Scar* and *Iron Council*. Those were followed by an acclaimed string of entirely standalone and thrillingly genre-fluid novels.

Following a pair of novellas in 2016, Miéville seemed to change direction, moving away from fiction almost entirely. In the intervening eight years he's published books about the Russian Revolution and the Communist Manifesto, but his genre output has been restricted to the occasional short story. This month, however, he's back, with *The Book Of Elsewhere*, a surprising new novel co-written with a very unexpected collaborator.

"I never stopped writing fiction," Miéville clarifies. "That said, it's quite true that I haven't published as much fiction recently as in the decade before. The vagaries of publishing schedules are intricately overlapping wave patterns from several sources. In this case, the invitation was so very unexpected, sometimes a provocation like that can jolt you out of patterns and make you consider things in a new way."

The "invitation" he's referring to is one of the more unexpected publishing news stories of the last few years. *The Book Of Elsewhere* isn't just Miéville's tenth full-length novel, it's a collaboration with Keanu Reeves, set in the actor's BRZRKR universe – a burgeoning multimedia franchise originated in comics by Reeves and Matt Kindt, but which also has a TV series and a film in development.

KILL. DIE. COME BACK

"Keanu has been a reader of my stuff for a while, and has been very generous and thoughtful about it," Miéville explains, when asked how the two first crossed paths. "When he contacted me, I was very flattered, very surprised, and very curious."

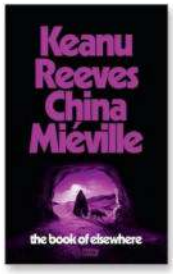
Miéville admits that he had "heard of but not read" the comics when Reeves reached out to him, but was quick to get up to speed. "I made sure to read it before we met, of course. It was very important not just that I was familiar with it but that it chimed with me, and, crucially, that I could think of ways we might honour it in a novel, while trying to do new things with it, things for which a novel is better suited."

BIODATA

From **Born in Norwich; brought up in Willesden.**

Greatest Hits ***Perdido Street Station* (2000), *Iron Council* (2004) and *The City & The City* (2009) all won the Arthur C Clarke Award. The latter was adapted into a TV show in 2018.**

Random Fact **At the 2001 general election Miéville stood as a candidate for Socialist Alliance in Regent's Park and Kensington North, receiving 1.2% of votes cast.**



The Book Of Elsewhere follows B, who Miéville describes as "a melancholy and existentially adrift immortal warrior, on an epochs-long hunt for mortality – not the same thing as death – and to make sense of what he is." B, also sometimes referred to as Unute, has lived for some 80,000 years so far, seen empires rise and fall, and claims to have a photographic memory. In the present he's working with, "or more properly is a weapon for", a secretive department of the US government. The book delves both into his life among mortals and his profoundly weird past.

"We see glimpses of his immensely long life, through the eyes of those who've interacted with him over the centuries, and piece together hints and secrets reaching back 800 centuries," says Miéville. "It's a story exploring ancient powers, modern warfare and humanity's universal desire for purpose through a mysterious and thrilling lens."

BREAKING THE LORE

While the comic is primarily action-led, *The Book Of Elsewhere* explores the unnerving existential implications of immortality – especially when another character, who should be very dead, also returns to life. And as with all Miéville's novels, it riffs on genre fiction tropes while digging deeper to find some emotional truth. The cast of soldiers here are all messily real human beings, rather than badass marine clichés. It's also very much a standalone novel which can be read with no knowledge of the comics.

"One of the big appeals was that Keanu was always very open to being creative with the universe, and was never precious about 'established lore'," says Miéville, when asked if he found the process of tying into an established universe restrictive. "We tend to describe this as 'inspired' by, rather than set in the same universe as, the *BRZRKR* comics. He had certain key tenets of the character and the universe that he wanted to maintain, but beyond that he was very open to changing various aspects of character and setting. Which is all to say that I had a great amount of freedom."

When asked if he'd consider writing for the *BRZRKR* comics he says, "If I was invited and if I could come up with some ideas that excited Keanu and excited me, sure!" In the meantime, he has another book in the offing... "I'm just finishing a novel – the novel – on which I've been working for well over half my adult life," he confirms. "After 20 years, I'm hoping it'll be out before too long. That has been pretty giddying."

The Book Of Elsewhere is published by Del Rey on 23 July.

> **“The vagaries of publishing schedules are intricately overlapping wave patterns”**

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AUGUST 2024

Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 72 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 76 | TV 82 | BOOKS 86 | COMICS 92 | GAMES & STUFF 94

THIS ISSUE 56 REVIEWS

72

A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE

Silent Running

Highlights

76

THE AGITATOR

→ This Blu-ray box set showcases the idiosyncratic work of French director Jean-Pierre Mocky.

82

DOCTOR WHO

→ No cunning anagrams in this review, guaranteed. Or are there? Could be a double bluff.

86

THE BOOK OF ELSEWHERE

→ China Miéville and Keanu Reeves team up for this tale of an immortal warrior.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

Samira discovers an Englishman in New York.

A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE

Scary Tale Of New York

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 99 minutes

Director **Michael Sarnoski**

Cast **Lupita Nyong'o, Joseph Quinn, Alex Wolff, Djimon Hounsou**

In the original *A Quiet Place,* we only had a few newspaper headlines pinned up around John Krasinski's CCTV monitors to explain how the world had been brought to its knees by an alien army of "dark angels".

A Quiet Place: Part II added some context with its flashback opening, and the apocalyptic exposition we received from Djimon Hounsou's former city dweller Henri. Yet it was not enough to resolve all the questions we had about the eyeless ETs whose ultra-sensitive hearing meant that making the slightest sound was tantamount to an instant death sentence.

For fans of the franchise, then, prequel *A Quiet Place: Day One* will hopefully act as the missing piece in the puzzle underpinning one of the most terrifyingly effective sci-fi series of recent years. By shifting the focus away from the embattled Abbott clan and their sand-lined stomping grounds in upstate New York, meanwhile, director Michael Sarnoski also has an opportunity to rectify one of its few missteps: the impression it left that its alien invasion was primarily a problem for white people.

> **"Tries to do something tonally different"**

It's an oversight immediately addressed by having Lupita Nyong'o play resourceful lead Samira, a poet dealing with a terminal illness who finds herself better equipped than most to cope when monster-bearing meteors start crashing down on a frenetic downtown Manhattan.

Pig director Sarnoski nimbly choreographs the chaos that ensues when the noisiest place on the planet meets the galaxy's deadliest lifeform. (An opening crawl informs us the average decibel level in NYC is "the volume of a constant scream.") By partnering Sam not only with an anxious English stranger named Eric (*Stranger Things*' Joseph Quinn) but also a cat called Frodo, meanwhile, he escalates the tension just as exponentially as the first *Quiet Place* did when it gave Emily Blunt's Evelyn a newborn.

Intriguingly, however, Sarnoski has more on his mind than just carnage and destruction. If the world is crumbling to pieces about you, how exactly do you want to spend your last days, hours and minutes? In Sam's case, it's leaving behind the patients with whom she's travelled for a day out in the city to return to cherished places from her healthy youth: Harlem's finest pizzeria, for example, or the jazz club where her beloved late dad used to tinkle the ivories.

It's a subtle and, yes, poetic touch that makes *Day One*'s action more than merely a matter of survival. And if it results in a little less than the normal amount of creature feature mayhem, that's a price worth paying for a film that tries to do something tonally different with a now firmly established formula. **Neil Smith**

i Canary Wharf doubled for New York in some scenes, while Charing Cross Tube stood in for a Manhattan subway station.

IN A VIOLENT NATURE

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 12 JULY
18 | 94 minutes
Director **Chris Nash**
Cast **Ry Barrett, Andrea Pavlovic, Cameron Love, Reece Presley**

The idea of a *Halloween*/*Friday The 13th* slasher shot more from the point of view of the killer is one brimming with promise, but that's something which *In A Violent Nature* only occasionally delivers upon.

This is a film with a very deliberate, even languorous pace. Early shots come across like Terrence Malick taking a stab at horror, the camera often staying locked in place for the 1.33:1 square frame, unless it is roaming after Ry Barrett's vengeful corpse Johnny (whose backstory is sketched in quickly and loosely) like a faithful dog.

Which isn't to say the film is without its gory charms. There are some appealingly grungy, low-fi moments, particularly when Johnny gets his hands on any of the victims. Director Chris Nash indulges in a full-on homage to the classics he's aping, practical effects spewing blood and guts, and the kills are inventive. But is that enough to justify a full-length running time rather than a short, sharp shocker? Rarely, while the acting from the disposable young targets is all over the place.

The third act, meanwhile, grinds to a halt, a laborious monologue sapping the tension from the denouement. High marks for ambition, but aside from Johnny's claret-splashing handiwork the execution leaves a lot to be desired.

James White

THE WATCHED

Fear's looking at you

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 102 minutes
Director **Ishana Night Shyamalan**
Cast **Dakota Fanning, Georgina Campbell, Olwen Fouéré, Oliver Finnegan**

Adapted from AM Shine's folk horror novel *The Watchers*, *The Watched* marks Ishana Night Shyamalan's film directing debut (yes, the surname means expectations are naturally higher) after a few years working on her father's series *Servant*. While she certainly shows some promise, this initial effort is cursed with the old issue of an enticing idea that doesn't entirely gel into a fully satisfying cinematic experience.

Dakota Fanning is Mina, an American woman shrinking from the world as she processes past trauma, hiding out in Ireland. During an admittedly original task (deliver a parrot to a zoo), she ends up lost in a spooky forest, where creatures trap people in a mysterious structure and then... look at them every night via a two-way mirror.

> **"Could have benefitted from a couple of extra rewrites"**

Problem is, the first couple of acts ladle on the eerie atmosphere, only for it to almost dissipate in a rushed, chaotic third one which loads you down with new information. It's like someone telling you a ghost story then breathlessly dashing through to the end.

The performances are similarly varied. While Fanning is suitably haunted and *Barbarian*'s Georgina Campbell gives good nervy energy as Ciara, fellow watchees Olwen Fouéré (as Madeline) and Oliver Finnegan (as Daniel) are saddled with rote characters, the former in particular tasked with laying out reams of lore – and she's not the only one.

Shyamalan clearly knows how to generate tension, but this could have benefitted from a couple of extra rewrites and someone checking the logic for holes.

James White

i Reportedly, the title was changed from the book/US release for the UK so as to avoid confusion with Netflix's *The Watcher*.

THE EXORCISM

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 93 minutes
Director **Joshua John Miller**
Cast **Russell Crowe, Ryan Simpkins, Sam Worthington, Chloe Bailey**

Having played a disguised demon in *A New York Winter's Tale* and appearing in last year's *The Pope's Exorcist*, Russell Crowe completes a diabolical trio with this limp meta-horror about an over-the-hill actor who gets hired to play a fiend-dispelling priest.

Directed by Joshua John Miller, whose late father Jason played Father Karras in 1973's *The Exorcist*, *The Exorcism* reprises some of that film's seminal moments, and even has its own Regan MacNeil in pop star Chloe Bailey. No amount of slavish obeisance to William Friedkin's original, alas, can make *The Exorcism* anything more than an inept retro knock-off whose muddled plot keeps taking precedence over its grisly shocks and scares.

The fact that Adam Goldberg's *Georgetown Project* has already lost one leading man (Adrian Pasdar) should be enough to set alarm bells ringing. But having squandered a promising career to alcoholism, Anthony Miller (Crowe) is in no position to turn a job down, even if it carries the threat of demonic possession and risks estranging him further from his teenage daughter Lee (Ryan Simpkins).

It's not long before Tony is urinating in stairwells, cracking his forehead on tabletops and reciting Satanic verses in Latin. For all its star's scene-stealing, however, *The Exorcism* barely registers as a footnote to Friedkin's masterclass. **Neil Smith**

"Everything's great!" "Is it, though? Is it *really*?"

INSIDE OUT 2

High Anxiety

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

U | 96 minutes

Director **Kelsey Mann**

Cast **Amy Poehler, Phyllis Smith, Maya Hawke, Kensington Tallman**

Thank heavens this sequel doesn't let down one of Pixar's finest films.

Young Riley's emotional tribulations continue as she hits 13 and puberty. Her sporting prowess means she's chosen for an intensive training weekend away from home, where she's torn between loyalty to her friends and desperation to impress an older girl she idolises.

This is reflected in her head as a tussle between Riley's established emotions, led by Joy and Sadness, and newer feelings, led by the frantic, dictatorial Anxiety. These interlopers change Riley's sense of right and wrong, her very self, which the film exquisitely envisages as a tower of glowing roots fed by subterranean memories.

Like any good sequel, *Inside Out 2* builds on its predecessor's ideas. Riley's reconfiguring mind is shown as a raging brainstorm, an avalanche of repressed bad moments, and a sweatshop of blobby artists sketching nightmare thoughts. There are some great joke characters spoofing videogames and pre-school TV.

Like Anxiety, it's fast and frantic, losing the lyricism and pathos of the original – nothing here matches the tragic loss of Riley's imaginary friend Bing Bong in the first film. But it's still very good indeed. **Andrew Osmond**

ℹ Initially Anxiety was much more antagonistic. Director Kelsey Mann took inspiration from 1950's *All About Eve*.

MAXXXINE

A scream queen is born

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 104 minutes

Director **Ti West**

Cast **Mia Goth, Kevin Bacon, Giancarlo Esposito, Elizabeth Debicki**

Ti West's *X* trilogy has always been one step ahead. The first film saw a group of '70s porn stars being slaughtered by a sexually frustrated pensioner, and ended with the announcement of *Pearl*, which took us back to the 1910s for the villain's origin story.

That in turn ended by letting the audience know that we'd next be heading to the '80s to see if the original film's final girl could make it in Hollywood.

X and *Pearl* were shot back to back and did feel of a piece, and while the third instalment has plenty going for it, it feels more tacked on. There's still plenty of practical gore, and an astonishing Mia Goth performance at the centre, though; while there has been talk of further films, *MaXXXine* works best as a raucous conclusion to this very fruitful partnership between West and the actor.

We return to *X*'s heroine in '80s Los Angeles, where she's attempting to transition from porn star to movie star, and moonlighting as a peep show dancer. She gets cast in a horror movie sequel directed by the stern but talented Elizabeth Bender (Elizabeth Debicki), but finds herself pursued by serial killer the Night Stalker and a sleazy private investigator, played with scenery-chewing aplomb by Kevin Bacon.

The cast is noticeably more stacked than in previous instalments, with supporting roles played by Bobby Cannavale, Michelle Monaghan, Lily Collins and Halsey, while scene after scene is stolen by Giancarlo Esposito, playing Pearl's mercurial agent. While the plot's biggest twists can be spotted a mile away, it never feels lazily scripted, and you can feel West's sincere love for '80s horror and his confidence in his leading lady throughout every monologue and grisly setpiece. It'd be far too big a spoiler to say whether or not Maxine's Hollywood dreams come true, but suffice to say this film further proves that Mia Goth is a bona fide star.

Leila Latif

The grammar police took shop signs very seriously.

ℹ Kevin Bacon knows all about starting out in horror: one of his early roles saw him killed with an arrow in *Friday The 13th*.

"Those legs! Where does he get those trousers?"

LONGLEGS

SFX Loves

Silence Of The Damned

★★★★★

RELEASED 12 JULY

TBC | 101 minutes

Director **Oz Perkins**

Cast **Maika Monroe, Nicolas Cage, Blair Underwood, Alicia Witt**

While most horror movies cleave to being supernatural or not, *Longlegs* is an intriguing combination of the two, part *Silence Of The Lambs*, part *Annabelle* and part *It*.

Maika Monroe plays Lee Harker, a Clarice Starling-esque FBI agent who's "half psychic". She's tasked by her boss (an impeccably cast Blair Underwood) with tracking down Longlegs (an equally impeccably cast Nicolas Cage), a serial killer who dispatches entire families and leaves behind cryptic notes to taunt the investigators. To make matters more complicated, Longlegs once visited the Harker family, leaving Lee's mother (Alicia Witt) irreparably traumatised, but the pair survived the ordeal.

> **A transfixing, thrilling and deeply disturbing piece of work**

It would be criminal to give away much more, but Oz Perkins's film tracks the FBI investigation while keeping the audience aware that it's unlikely any prison could contain the evil at the heart of it. Artful sound design makes the plentiful gore all the more impactful, and while Cage's villain is used sparingly, every moment he's on-screen is utterly delicious.

Even through some truly ungodly prosthetics you can still spot a devilish twinkle in Cage's eye, and despite the dark subject matter he appears to be having a whale of a time as an unhinged, Satan-worshipping dollmaker.

Longlegs has been lauded as the scariest horror film of the year, which is in the eye of the beholder, but it may genuinely be the most atmospheric; there's a creeping dread in each frame and unsettling tension to every interaction that makes it a transfixing, thrilling and deeply disturbing piece of work.

Leila Latif

i The script was set in 1992, but Perkins then changed it to 1993 to avoid having framed pictures of George Bush in the FBI offices.

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THE AGITATOR

The French Collection

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1982/1984/1987 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Jean-Pierre Mocky**

Cast **Marie-José Nat, Michel Serrault, Catherine Deneuve, Jean-Pierre Mocky**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Prodigiously** productive (his Wikipedia page lists 67 features), the late French director Jean-Pierre Mocky is little known outside his homeland. Even there, this independent spirit was a marginal figure. This fascinating box set – subtitled *Three Provocations From The Wild World Of Jean-Pierre Mocky* – samples his eclectic oeuvre.

Litan is the highlight, a heady slice of fantastique which slots alongside the work of Jean Rollin. Kicking off with a premonitory nightmare full of scenes we later witness, it centres on a town holding a carnivalesque annual celebration of the dead. For reasons that are opaque at best, the dead then begin to return, with townsfolk rendered catatonic, or driven to chaotic violence by possessing spirits.

It's a film in ceaseless motion, replete with surreal imagery as Litan's fog-shrouded streets become crowded with masked figures. Cinematographer Edmond Richard previously worked with Orson Welles, and in framing the real-life town of Annonay makes the same atmospheric use of run-down locations as he did on 1962's *The Trial*. At various points we visit the psychiatric wing of the local hospital, but the entirety of this baffling, fascinating film seems to exist in Bedlam.

Though described here as "nightmarish fantasy", *Kill The Referee*'s scenario is implausible, but not impossible. An extended chase, it follows a group of football supporters intent on punishing a referee for awarding a penalty. As events snowball out of control, the body count mounts. Michel Serrault is superb as the hooligans' ringleader; it's possible to see in this pathetic, resentful figure an exploration both of mob violence and political extremism.

Finally, *Agent Trouble* is a Hitchcockian thriller, with French cinema legend Catherine Deneuve – deglamorised by a curly wig – the innocent tangled up in a mystery: the murder of a coach-load of tourists. Co-star Richard Bohringer steals the show as a dashingly suave assassin. Sadly, it ends not with Mount Rushmore, but with a whimper.

Extras Critic Anton Bitel has a stab at making sense of *Litan*'s oneiric strangeness in an articulate video essay (17 minutes), while a French TV show from 1982 (26 minutes) provides fascinating behind the scenes insights. In an interview shot during production (13 minutes), Mocky discusses his attitude to fantasy. We also see the director impatiently barking orders in a brief report from the set of *Kill The Referee* (four minutes), while journalist Philippe Auclair (17 minutes) astutely places the film within the context of the '80s football scene. Interviewed "on the couch" for French TV (18 minutes), the director self-deprecatingly calls himself "the Tesco of cinema"!

> "It's a film replete with surreal imagery"

Mocky collaborator Eric Le Roy sounds forth on both *Referee* (14 minutes) and *Agent Trouble* (23 minutes), revealing that Deneuve made the director execute his first ever reshoot! *Agent Trouble* also comes with an intro by Mocky's daughter (five minutes) and brief news interviews with both leads (four minutes each). Plus: trailer; 80-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

Director Jean-Pierre Mocky also stars in *Litan*.

i Granowski, the police inspector Mocky plays in *Kill The Referee*, was named after Russian film director Alexis Granowsky.

THE NEW ADVENTURES OF BATMAN

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1977 | PG | Blu-ray

Director **Don Towsley**

Cast **Adam West, Burt Ward, Lou Scheimer, Melendy Britt**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A decade on from** the high-camp Bat-craze of the '60s, and a decade away from Frank Miller's reimagining, this cartoon finds the Caped Crusader at his kid-friendliest.

Made by Filmation, who also gave *Star Trek* an animated afterlife, it reunites live-action stars Adam West and Burt Ward. Ward recreates the Boy Wonder with characteristic gusto; West sounds a little more laid-back, dialling down the irony-drenched declamations.

The animation is limited, but there's a primary-coloured Silver Age charm to the designs and some fun new villains, including candy-mad Sweet Tooth, who plots to turn the city's water supply into chocolate syrup.

The Dynamic Duo are joined by extra-dimensional imp Bat-Mite, a half-forgotten fixture of the comic books. Essentially Gotham's Scrappy-Doo, this aggravatingly cutesy sidekick injects the kind of levity US networks insisted on at the time, part of a crusading drive to morally improve the youth. Each episode ends with a dedicated Bat-Message, spelling out the lesson of that week's adventure. Just imagine the Frank Miller version of that.

Extras A featurette on Batman's journey to the world of Saturday morning toons (19 minutes). **Nick Setchfield**

WINNIE-THE-POOH: BLOOD AND HONEY II

★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 18 | Download
Director **Rhys Frake-Waterfield**
Cast **Scott Chambers, Ryan Oliva, Tallulah Evans, Simon Callow**

"It's like a horror version of *Home Alone*", says Lexy (Tallulah Evans), one of the many snatches of dire dialogue in this ropey sequel to the ropiest horror hit of 2023. Citing the Macaulay Culkin classic is truly wishful thinking, as director Rhys Frake-Waterfield returns for another tedious slasher, bastardising the loveable characters created by AA Milne.

Set shortly after the "Hundred Acre Massacre", when a maniac Pooh and his woodland pals went crazy in the woods, it sees Christopher Robin (Scott Chambers) being blamed for the killings by locals. When the murders start up again, Christopher tries to clear his name with girlfriend Lexy in tow, but Frake-Waterfield cares little for story (even as Simon Callow's janitor tries to explain these creatures with backstory). The bloodshed is relentless, as Pooh (Ryan Oliva) goes on the rampage, but from bear traps to baseball bats, it all feels utterly gratuitous and – worse – yawn-inducing.

Chambers makes a good fist of his two-dimensional lead, and the practical effects are a notch above the film's predecessor, but this is tragic stuff. At one point the murderous Owl says, "There is no God." Watching this, it's hard to disagree. **James Mottram**

"What do you mean, there's no hot sauce left?"

PHOTO 12 / ALAMY

ANTHROPOPHAGOUS

Foetal Attraction

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1980 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray
Director **Joe D'Amato**
Cast **Tisa Farrow, Saverio Vallone, Serena Grandi, Margaret Mazzantini**

Memorable movie rabbits: go! There's Roger of course, Harvey, and Thumper. But the bunny seared into the mind of many gorehounds is a skinned one. It stands in here for a foetus ripped from a pregnant woman by a deranged cannibal – a moment of outrageous extremity that helped to earn *Anthropophagous* "video nasty" status.

Following six young holidaymakers who visit a strangely deserted Greek island, Joe D'Amato's film is, once you scrape away the mystique that's accreted around it over the years, a fairly standard shocker with some trad jump scares. And it's no match for the iconic poster art.

Neither is it strong on logic. Puzzling elements include said cannibal's ability to pull people underwater *Jaws*-style, and just why a tiny, forgotten island boasts a vast mansion and impressive catacomb. However, in-between its moments of shameless excess, it has some effectively moody moments, with good use of POV and a doomy electronic score. The film really shouldn't work at all, but to a degree, it does.

Extras Across two interviews (32 minutes), writer/cannibal actor Luigi Montefiori is amusingly candid, confessing that he "didn't like writing much" and painting a picture of director D'Amato as "clever" but mainly concerned with shooting fast. Co-star Zora Kerowa (24 minutes) rounds off a career overview talk by critiquing #MeToo. There's also a redundant chat with the director of the 2022 sequel (13 minutes).

The critical commentary is rather waffly; a visual essay (26 minutes) which lays out all the key production facts is a better option. You also get an interesting deleted scene, which was cunningly substituted for the most extreme footage when the film was submitted to the Italian censors! Plus: trailers. An 88 Films website exclusive Limited Edition adds a booklet and poster. **Ian Berriman**

i The catacomb used in the film is actually located in Nepi, in Italy's Lazio region. It dates back to the fourth/fifth century.

LIFE AFTER THE NEVERENDING STORY

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 15 | Blu-ray
Director **Lisa Downs**

After previously tackling *Flash Gordon* and *Flight Of The Navigator*, director Lisa Downs returns with another excellent *Life After* documentary. This time we're in Fantasia with the cast and crew of *The NeverEnding Story*, and it's a wild ride. "I have a little cotton-mouth from smoking all that weed earlier," grins former child star Noah Hathaway.

The 1984 movie has recently gained new fans thanks to a musical cameo in *Stranger Things*. Singer Limahl is here, still thrilled at the success of his brainworm. But Hathaway's the focus, a long way from his days as the innocent Atreyu.

Now purple-haired, pierced, covered in tattoos and fond of the F-word, his life's been blighted by a back injury received during rehearsals. Meanwhile the film's Childlike Empress, Tami Stronach, now a dancer, shows the camera crew around soundstages she roamed as a child, pirouetting with glee.

The access is phenomenal, from original scripts to puppets (although the latex on the original Falkor rots away and has to be replaced every three months). Beware, however: you may gain a new perspective on a certain horse scene...

Extras An assortment of extended interviews (totalling 99 minutes); booklet. A Collectors' Bundle comes with five postcards, a sew-on patch and a Polaroid. **Jayne Nelson**

Quick, crank up the plushie merch machine!

ULTRAMAN: RISING

He's Not Just Ken

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | PG | SVOD
Directors Shannon Tindle, John Aoshima
Cast Christopher Sean, Gedde Watanabe, Keone Young, Tamlyn Tomita

NETFLIX **Netflix switches** gears with its second original contribution to the Ultra franchise, swapping the teenage angst of the 2019-2013 *Ultraman* series for a kid-friendly adventure. The two stories share the basic concept concerning the power of Ultraman passing from father to son, but tonally and visually they're different animals.

Ultraman: Rising introduces Ken Sato, a baseball star in the US who returns to Japan to take on the mantle of Ultraman from his father, Professor Sato, now retired from the kaiju-bashing business. Ken is a reluctant, incompetent hero, who'd rather focus on his career than fighting monsters, but he's forced to reevaluate his priorities when he rescues a baby kaiju.

Refreshingly for an English language production, *Rising* keeps the story situated firmly in Japan. The film requires no prior knowledge of *Ultraman* lore (abandoning the alien angle entirely), there's an engaging antagonist in mad scientist Dr Onda, and the final battle is colourful and energetic.

However, Ken's arc feels rote and the pace lags in the middle. The directors succeed in bringing a new perspective to a 58-year-old character, but it's strictly one for the kids. **David West**

i Kenji's cuddly bunny toy is Lost Ollie, from the Netflix series of the same name, created by *Rising* co-director Shannon Tindle.

LOOP TRACK

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2023 | 15 | Blu-ray

A nervous nebbish goes hiking in the bush in this Kiwi psychological thriller/comedy. Writer/director Thomas Sainsbury is the withdrawn Ian, convinced something's lurking in the trees watching him and the other hikers he meets.

He does a sterling job of portraying a character wracked with anxiety, making Ian both pathetic and sympathetic, and there's a fair degree of tension. Is it just in his head? All we'll say is that the resolution is impressively barking.

Extras Commentary; nine featurettes; short. **Ian Berriman**

THE DEVIL'S BATH

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **Though it's being** promoted as folk horror, and does toy with such elements, this Austrian period piece is really a portrait of mental disintegration, its baleful force psychological rather than supernatural.

Set in 1750, it follows a broody newly-wed who slowly slips into depression due to her husband's lack of sexual interest. Beautifully shot, it's an affectingly tragic character study with a vivid sense of time and place, immersing us in the daily routines of a small village. **Ian Berriman**

THINE EARS SHALL BLEED

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 15 JULY
2024 | N/A | Download

In this case, the title turns out to be extremely literal.

In 1860s Frontier America, a reverend and his family get lost in the backwoods, where they hear an inexplicable ringing. Devout Puritans, they declare it the voice of God... then everyone's ears start bleeding, and things take a demonic turn.

Effective character work helps sell the mounting dread, but with five characters there's nowhere for it to really go, and the epilogue lacks the courage of its convictions. **Sarah Dobbs**

SUNRISE

★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 15 | Download

In this Northern Irish thriller, a vampire lurks in the woods outside a small town, but no one really has time to worry about it – they're too busy being menaced by a racist crime lord.

Guy Pearce – yes, that one – does a lot of monologuing about the film's themes (it's about *blood*, do you see?) but someone seems to have forgotten to write an actual story around them. Instead, you get lingering shots of deer, trees, and people sitting about doing nothing. It's more of a mood board than a movie. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE HOLY VIRGIN VS THE EVIL DEAD

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1991 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Tony Liu**

Cast **Donnie Yen, Pauline Yeung, Kathy Chau, Ken Lo**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **First things first:** barring a brief shot that recalls Sam Raimi's "plankcam", this Hong Kong fantasy has no connection to *The Evil Dead*.

Centred on a university professor whose female students are slaughtered by a "sex maniac" rocking a ponytail and ripped jeans, it eventually shifts to Cambodia, on the trail of a legendary "Goddess Of All Mothers" who for some reason sports a moustache.

One of the investigating cops is now seeing the professor's estranged wife, who's also targeted by the aforementioned demonic Bros fan – just two of a teetering pile of coincidences.

It makes very little sense, but does boast frenetic pacing and a staggering amount of incident, as our heroes face-kick and machine-gun endless waves of henchmen. The excitable way it will suddenly chuck in a random element – piranha! A leopard! A flamethrower! – is endearing. And a potty-mouthed female cop supplies guffaws, spitting lines like "Be ready to wank yourself in jail!"

Extras A stronger "Category Three" cut which basically ups the boob count has to draw upon spotty SD footage. You also get interviews with writer/AD/actor Lee Ho-kwan (28 minutes), and actor Robert Mak (16 minutes) – both charming, when they're not scratching/fiddling with their nose... Plus: booklet; poster. **Ian Berriman**

NIGHT OF THE BIG HEAT

Phew, what a scorcher!

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED **29 JULY**

1967 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD

Director **Terence Fisher**

Cast **Christopher Lee, Patrick Allen, Peter Cushing, Jane Merrow**

As well as ploughing through Tigon's back catalogue, 88 Films is reviving the output of fellow British distributor Planet Film Productions – all of three horrors. *Doctor Who* fans will find points of interest here: the composer also worked on *Dr Who & The Daleks*, while '80s hacks Pip and Jane Baker contributed to the script.

It's one of those British horrors which casts Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing, then gives them disappointingly little interaction. Veteran Hammer director Terence Fisher is behind the camera, with reliably workmanlike results.

The island of Fara is suffering a bizarre heatwave – whoever was tasked with topping up the cast's sweat patches was run ragged. Cushing plays the local doctor; Lee an abrasive scientist who deduces that the temperature, strange buzzing noises and deaths by incineration are all signs of a peculiar variety of alien invasion.

> **"Things pick up once we finally see the invading creatures"**

Frustratingly little time is spent addressing said invasion, and too much chatting in the local pub. A subplot about its owner Jeff (Patrick Allen) and a secretary he turns out to have had an affair with feels particularly extraneous.

Things pick up once we finally see the invading creatures, but they're quickly disposed of. And in-between, an attempted rape (extreme heat drives decent chaps to sex crimes, y'see...) feels like a grubby attempt at titillation.

Extras Interviews with actor Jane Merrow (12 minutes), and the second AD (six minutes) don't reveal much. In his commentary, film writer David Flint leavens the regulation data with a little humour, pausing to crack open a beer at an appropriate juncture. Plus: gallery; booklet.

Ian Berriman

i The pub owned by Patrick Allen's character is still in business today: it's The Swan Inn in Milton Keynes.

THE MAN FROM UNCLE

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED **29 JULY**

2015 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Guy Ritchie**

Cast **Henry Cavill, Armie Hammer, Elizabeth Debicki, Alicia Vikander**

Conceived as a prequel, Guy Ritchie's irreverent Cold War spy caper is *The Man From UNCLE* in name only. Gone is the treasured iconography – two-way radio pens, triangular ID badges, subterranean HQs hidden beneath dry cleaners – in favour of a more universal homage to the glossy Euro-espionage movies of the '60s.

It's a film with swagger and panache to spare, an amusingly glib, immaculately styled confection all but stolen by Elizabeth Debicki as the kind of global threat that belongs on the cover of *Vogue*.

Extras An interview with producer and co-writer Lionel Wigram finds him grateful for the film's cult status (16 minutes), while actor Luca Calvani offers some personable behind-the-scenes reflections (15 minutes).

A critic-driven retrospective on Ritchie's oeuvre is hobbled by only being able to showcase clips from *UNCLE*, but is engaging nonetheless (25 minutes). Fans and experts also look back at the phenomenon of the '60s show, providing useful context for newcomers (28 minutes).

Also present are the featurettes from the original Blu-ray release, along with a commentary by movie journalists Bryan Reesman and Max Evry. Plus: gallery; trailer; poster; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

"Dunno about you, but I'm off my face, me."

THE IMAGINARY

Drop Dead Fred for kids

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2023 | PG | SVOD
Directors **Yoshiyuki Momose**
Cast **Kokoro Terada, Rio Suzuki/Louie Rudge-Buchanan, Evie Kiszel**

NETFLIX **Director Yoshiyuki** Momose and scriptwriter/producer Yoshiaki Nishimura cement their status as the heirs to Hayao Miyazaki with this beautiful adaptation of AF Harrold's 2014 children's book. It's the story of Rudger, the imaginary best friend of a girl called Amanda, who lives with her mother Lizzie above a bookshop.

When Rudger is abruptly separated from Amanda following an accident, he discovers a hidden world of other Imaginaries, even as he struggles to find his way home. The influence of Studio Ghibli permeates the film, from its English source material and plucky young female characters to Kenichi Konishi's expressive character designs. There's a creepy villain, Mr Bunting, accompanied by a girl whose unsettling appearance recalls the ghostly Sadako from *Ring* as well as Wednesday Addams.

After a brisk start, Nishimura's screenplay gets a little lost at the start of the second act, with a lengthy detour into the mechanics of imaginary friends and a space battle sequence that looks terrific but adds little to the plot.

Fortunately, the story recovers focus and momentum in the final act, leading to an impressively tense showdown that ties all the threads together for a genuinely moving denouement. **David West**

i Writer AF Harrold named villain Mr Bunting after poet Basil Bunting: "His book of *Collected Poems* was next to my desk."

THE LAST STARFIGHTER

Unready Player One

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 15 JULY
1984 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray
Director **Nick Castle**
Cast **Lance Guest, Dan O'Herlihy, Catherine Mary Stewart**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This kid-friendly** "80s space opera may feel like a patchwork of familiar elements, but its good-natured charm is irresistible. It centres on teen Alex Rogan (Lance Guest), who yearns to shake off his trailer park life and see the world.

After breaking the record on a new arcade game, he discovers that it was designed to recruit fighters for an intergalactic war, and is whisked off to defend the Rylan Star League.

Everything a 12-year-old could want is present and correct, from the flying car that takes Alex into space, to his reptilian helmsman, and the villain who declares "I will darken the sky with their ashes!". It's a film with plenty of heart, wry humour, and a bit more edge than you might expect (a 2024 remount probably wouldn't include a little brother with a pile of *Playboys*...)

The weak link is the then-groundbreaking CG used for the space battles, which renders every cut from live action to effects horribly jarring. You can't help thinking how much the film would have benefitted from some old-school model work.

Extras Previously released in the US but making its UK debut, this Arrow Video release has six interviews (totalling 57 minutes). They include writer Jonathan Betuel, star Catherine Mary Stewart, the composer and an effects guy. Betuel is the most interesting, explaining how the "sword in the stone, but with a game" premise grew from reading *The Once And Future King*.

Elsewhere SF author Greg Bear recalls visiting CG firm Digital Productions for *Omni* magazine, while a collector who spent years creating a playable arcade game provides a portrait of fannish commitment. Guest teams up with his son on commentary; a second track features a chap from podcast The Projection Booth. Plus: trailers; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

"So, have you got a couple of 10p pieces?" "Ah."

i Director Nick Castle was previously the man wearing the Michael Myers mask in John Carpenter's *Halloween*.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS ***The American Society Of Magical Negroes*** (15 July) • ***Boy Kills World*** • ***Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*** ***Godzilla Minus One*** (Netflix) • ***Tarot*** • ***Tiger Stripes***

GONJIAM: HAUNTED ASYLUM

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2018 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Jung Bum-shik**

Cast **Oh Ah-yeon, Wi Ha-joon, Yoo Je-Yoon, Moon Ye-won**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Finally, a decent** answer to found footage's eternal question: "But why did you keep filming?". In this Korean horror, the crew are livestreaming their misadventures, and if they rack up a million viewers they all stand to make a chunk of cash.

Gimmick aside, though, this is pretty basic *Blair Witch Project* stuff: filmmakers head out to a legendarily haunted asylum, set up some fake scares, and start filming, only for real ghouls to join the party.

You can tell some serious thought went into the design of the set and the ghosts (particularly the way they move, and the noises they make... brrr!), and making the actors shoot in long uninterrupted takes with GoPros strapped to their heads makes for some effectively spooky jump scares.

But the verisimilitude falls apart if you think about it for too long (who's editing this?), and the way the story plays out is so generic that it's hard to shake the feeling that you've seen it all before.

Extras A new commentary by horror journalists Mary Beth McAndrews and Terry Mesnard and a new video essay by podcaster Zoë Rose Smith, plus six archival featurettes (59 minutes total) and trailers. The Limited Edition also comes with a 70-page booklet and six art cards. **Sarah Dobbs**

"Oh Christ, I've left the oven on! Again."

NIGHT OF THE EAGLE

Living a charmed life

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 24 JUNE

1962 | 12 | Blu-ray/DVD

Director **Sidney Hayers**

Cast **Peter Wyngarde, Janet Blair, Margaret Johnston, Anthony Nicholls**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Campus politics** takes a deadly turn in the latest entry in StudioCanal's Cult Classics line. Based on Fritz Leiber's 1943 novel *Conjure Wife*, it follows a dashing psychology professor (a buff Peter Wyngarde) who discovers that his wife (Janet Blair) has secreted protective charms all about the house. After disposing of them, his life goes to hell in a handcart as he's accused of rape, threatened with a gun, and nearly dies in a car crash. Yikes.

It's an intriguing tale, with some effective red herrings, but there are a few too many things that let it down. Though ostensibly centred on conjure magic, the waters are muddied in a scene that randomly invokes Satanism. And the tone is rather melodramatic, with Blair's performance in particular pitched a little too high.

Still, Wyngarde is a charismatic lead, there's a strong sense of urgency, and the climactic scenes in which the professor is menaced by a statue of an eagle come to life impress – if you can overlook the way unforgiving HD reveals that at one point the bird's obviously being guided using a string...

Extras The late Peter Wyngarde is charmingly twinkly in a 2015 interview (24 minutes), revealing that he turned the role down, only relenting on realising that it would pay for a sports car, and recalling having raw meat placed on his coat for the eagle attack scenes.

In a talking head (25 minutes) critic Anna Bogutskaya bigs up the film's feminist credentials, arguing that it metaphorically addresses the unacknowledged value of female domestic labour. This seems a bit of a stretch.

An archival commentary by co-writer Richard Matheson is rather sparse (unsurprisingly, given that he had zero involvement with filming). Expect regular one-minute silences. Plus: trailers; US opening credits; a gallery of behind-the-scenes stills. The Blu-ray also comes with four postcards. **Ian Berriman**

i "Hempnell College" was actually Taplow Court in Buckinghamshire. It's now the UK HQ of Buddhist organisation Soka Gakkai.

ROUND UP

The latest theatrical releases now hitting shiny disc include Alex Garland's near-future tale **CIVIL WAR** (15 July 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), which follows a group of journalists as they attempt to reach Washington before secessionist forces. We said: "A hard-hitting exercise in provocative make-believe." Extras: a 57-minute Making Of, and a 20-minute Q&A with the director and cast. The Spengler clan relocate to a certain Manhattan firehouse in **GHOSTBUSTERS: FROZEN EMPIRE** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), teaming up with the classic 'busters line-up to take on a phantom god set on bringing about a second Ice Age. We said: "Despite its chaotic cast and illogical plotting, it's jolly good fun." Bonuses consist of seven featurettes (64 minutes) and six deleted scenes. In **GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), a battle-scarred Kong and a super-charged Godzilla set aside their differences to battle new baddies from the Hollow Earth. Extras: commentary by the director and three other crew, and 14 bite-size featurettes (71 minutes). In **IMMACULATE** (out now Blu-ray/DVD), a young novice (Sydney Sweeney) suffers nightmares of hooded figures after joining a remote Italian convent. We said: "A gloriously unhinged tale that is unafraid to be gross, gory, and political." Finally, the latest TV box sets include **ANDOR** Season One (out now, 4K), **HALO** Season Two (15 July, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), and **STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS** Season Four (Blu-ray, out now).

"See that wall? Let's smash it to bits."

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- The Doctor is wearing another new outfit.
- The episode is principally set on Earth.

- The Doctor cries. There's no hanky in the TARDIS, sadly.
- Actress Susan Twist turns up in a new role.
- Ruby's presence causes it to start snowing.
- The Doctor calls someone "honey".
- The Doctor's granddaughter Susan is mentioned.

DOCTOR WHO

Season One

Let's Do The Susan Twist

SPOILER WARNING!

★★★★☆

UK: **BBC One/iPlayer, streaming now**
US: **Disney+, streaming now**
Showrunner **Russell T Davies**
Cast **Ncuti Gatwa, Millie Gibson, Bonnie Langford, Michelle Greenidge**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Now that the** dust of death has settled, what does Ncuti Gatwa's first report card look like? More A grades and Bs than Cs – with a gentle ticking-off for silly behaviour.

What season one (don't write in) unabashedly does is find new territory to explore – quite remarkably, for a 19-year-old revival of a 61-year-old show. For example: bewildering though they are (begging the question, "Does the Doctor know he's fictional?"), the *Moonlighting* levels of fourth wall-breaking in "The Devil's Chord" are delightfully cheeky.

Then there's the Fifteenth Doctor himself, all heart-on-sleeve emotionality. Even if this makes you feel as uncomfortable as being hugged by an American (shudder), you can appreciate the rationale: giving younger viewers a different kind of Doctor. Jodie Whittaker's version could feel a bit generic. You can't say that of Ncuti's.

Incidentally, it's valid to believe that the Doctor shouldn't have a romantic life. But if you object now, but didn't when the snogee was Madame de Pompadour... have a word with yourself.

The season gets off to a shaky start with "Space Babies", on which fan consensus seems clear: ground floor in the season polls. We're accustomed to seeing a new series kick off in light and frothy fashion – but talking babies and a snot monster? It's just too silly.

However, the run also boasts two bona fide classics: "73 Yards", a captivating mash-up of *It Follows* and *Who*'s own "Turn Left", anchored by a tour de force performance by Millie Gibson; and the *Black Mirror*-esque "Dot And Bubble", whose ingeniously seeded final sucker punch spins devastating drama from the leading man's skin colour.

Here, and in "Boom", Gatwa gets the chance to show his acting chops, and smashes it. The latter is a solid return by Steven Moffat, despite some familiar tropes (malfunctioning tech *again*?). Regency tale "Rogue" is, snogging aside, the most traditional entry: handsomely crafted, and good fun – though its titular bounty hunter is no match for Captain Jack.

Tieing together two fascinating ongoing mysteries (the identity of Ruby's mum; the omnipresence of Susan Triad), the finale's a mixed bag. There's some goose-pimplingly thrilling material here: the "Time Window" concept; '70s Big Bad Sutekh's return; humanity destroyed. Then this all-powerful Death God is put on a lead, and the universe is reset by "bringing death to death" – a calculation which suggests that if you multiply zero by zero, you get one.

The hype surrounding Ruby's mother also backfires a bit when it turns out she's just an ordinary woman with sinister dress sense. A touching reunion is overshadowed slightly by a sense of anticlimax.

Still, even when it's frustrating, or downright daffy (Sue Tech?!), this is a *memorable* season: willing to take risks, giddily unpredictable. *Who* is appointment viewing again – even if that does leave you bleary-eyed at 1.00am. **Ian Berriman**

i In "73 Yards", Roger ap Gwilliam wins a seat in Kennington – real-life location of Rose Tyler's home, the Powell Estate.

WONDLA Season One

A pick-me-up Fallout

★★★★☆

UK/US **Apple TV+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Bobs Gannaway**

Cast **Jeanine Mason, Teri Hatcher, Brad Garrett, Gary Anthony Williams**

EPISODES 1.01-1.07 **Skydance** Animation has teamed up with Apple before – their not-entirely successful film *Luck* even gets an extended call-out here – but they've really knocked it out of the park with this seven-part animated show. Based on Tony DiTerlizzi's book series, *WondLa* lifts the sweet illustrations from its printed pages and gives them a million-dollar upgrade.

We first meet Eva (Jeanine Mason) as a baby, being raised in a peaceful underground bunker by her robot mum (Teri Hatcher) after some kind of calamity – self-inflicted, of course – has wiped out humanity.

After reaching her teens, the lonely Eva wants to know if any other human children have survived in their respective bunkers dotted across the land. This means venturing into the post-apocalyptic world above. What horrors await?

Anyone who's watched *Fallout* will be bracing themselves – but in a surprise twist, it's actually kinda cool upstairs: Earth has been repopulated by bonkers aliens and weird plants. But while Eva ends up making friends willy-nilly on her travels, there are bad guys too, determined to capture her as a valuable "last human". Ulp.

> **"Earth has been repopulated by bonkers aliens and plants"**

"She may be plain-looking, but she's my mum."

There's producer input from such luminaries as John Lasseter, and excellent voice acting provided by everyone from *The Expanse*'s legendarily growly Shohreh Aghdashloo to *Cheers* star John Ratzenberger. *WondLa* does have one fault, however: we've seen all this before (and with a lot more blood, in the case of *Fallout*).

The series still shines, however, thanks to its devastatingly pretty animation and smart production design, not to mention several memorable, well-directed set-pieces which bring to mind elements of recent *Star Wars*.

This is the highest of high-quality fantasy. Kids are gonna love it. **Jayne Nelson**

ℹ Tony DiTerlizzi's favourite book as a child was *AD&D*'s first *Monster Manual*; he ended up illustrating for one in 1993.

MY LADY JANE Season One

When Tudor tribes go to war

★★★★☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**

Showrunner **Gemma Burgess**

Cast **Emily Bader, Edward Bluemel, Jordan Peters, Anna Chancellor**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **In the chaos that** followed Henry VIII's death and the short reign of his sickly son, Edward VI, Henry's great-niece, Lady Jane Grey, ended up as Queen. Great news for Jane! Except her cousin, Mary, had her beheaded after just nine days.

But what if Jane (Emily Bader) fought back? What if Edward (Jordan Peters) was secretly alive? And what if Tudor England wasn't divided between warring Catholics and Protestants but, in this alternate universe, between ordinary humans and those who can shapeshift into animals? Such is the premise of this fun show based on a YA book series and stuffed with sex, scheming and splendid swearing. Bader says "Bollocks!" convincingly as the beleaguered Jane, fighting for her life while also navigating an enemies-to-lovers arc with Guildford Dudley (Edward Bluemel).

The cast of British thesps, including Anna Chancellor, Rob Brydon and Dominic Cooper, have the time of their lives with the show's bawdy scenes. There's a smashing villain, too: Mary (Kate O'Flynn) is a screeching, warmongering horror only matched by the real Bloody Mary.

Of course there's nothing really new here. The witty, self-aware narration parodies *Bridgerton*'s Lady Whistledown, for starters – although we can't imagine Julie Andrews calling life a "kick in the tits". The irreverent tone is reminiscent of *Good Omens*. There are nods to everything from *Ladyhawke* to *Crocodile Dundee*. One chap lustily sings "Nights In White Satin" to his paramour.

It really is very silly. What's marvellous is that things never get *too* silly. It may be daft, with people turning into horses or cats or rabbits, but there's still just enough reality to make you care for the characters. History's Lady Jane sat on her throne for less than two weeks – hopefully this Jane will be around for much longer. **Jayne Nelson**

Bet one of them makes a cutting remark.

ℹ Blindfolded, the real Lady Jane couldn't see to put her head on the chopping block, famously crying: "Where is it?"

SUPACELL Season One

We can be Heroes

★★★½☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Creator **Rapman**

Cast **Tosin Cole, Adelayo Adedayo, Calvin Demba, Eddie Marsan**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Writer/director** Rapman pitched *Supacell* as *Heroes* in London – and it's a summary that's hard to best. Five seemingly normal South Londoners start developing powers. They have nothing else in common, except that one of them, Michael (played by former *Doctor Who* companion Tosin Cole), happens to know all their names after meeting a version of himself in the future.

Michael's warned that if he doesn't bring Sabrina (who has telekinesis), Tazer (invisibility), Andre (super strength) and Rodney (super speed) together, his fiancée will die.

It's essentially "Save the cheerleader, save the world" all over again. Where *Supacell* differs from *Heroes* is in its proclivity for playing in moral grey areas. Tazer, for instance, uses his powers to knife rival gangsters who threaten his crew. Meanwhile, Andre is broke and breaks cash machines for money, and drug dealer Rodney promises his customers product in five minutes or their money back.

Sabrina's the cleanest, being an NHS worker, while Michael drives a delivery van, yet they're both drawn into another world as they come to terms with their powers.

> **"Andre is broke and breaks cash machines for money"**

Don't make him angry. You wouldn't like him when...

And the whole time a shady organisation, led by Eddie Marsan's Ray, watches our protagonists through security cameras.

These first six episodes are a slow build, with a handful of genuinely surprising and thrilling moments, but there's a sense of predictability about the show's general direction. And the season ends up being the set up for an as yet unconfirmed second run, with the underwhelming finale implying that Rapman's been holding back a rather more interesting story. Still, it does a solid enough job of setting the scene and establishing some interesting characters.

Jack Shepherd

ℹ Filming took place around South London, including Deptford High Street, Peckham's Rye Lane and Burgess Park.

BEACON 23 Season One

The Lighthouse Family

★★★☆☆

UK **Paramount+, streaming now, Thursdays**

US **MGM+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Zak Penn**

Cast **Lena Headey, Stephan James, Stephen Root, Wade Bogert-O'Brien**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **There are plenty** of people who wonder whether anyone is watching Apple's TV output. Yet *Silo*, the adaptation of Hugh Howey's book series *Wool*, has certainly popped on the pop culture sonar – louder than this reworking of his *Beacon 23* stories, which has so far launched two seasons Stateside to little fanfare.

Still, if you're of a mind to watch another story that strands people in a contained space and has its characters digging into past secrets, then it could be worth a watch. A cerebral, occasionally overly serious meditation on weighty themes such as transhumanism, devotion, artificial intelligence and loneliness, it launches with Stephan James's Halan stuck aboard a Beacon, an outer space lighthouse whose gravity wave warning alerts guide starships in the sector away from patches of dark matter.

When Lena Headey's enigmatic Aster shows up as the survivor of a wrecked vessel, the mystery box narrative really starts to kick in. Perhaps the biggest surprise here is that despite a spirited turn from Headey and a stoically reliable performance from James, the best lines and most nuanced work come from the splendidly named Wade Bogert-O'Brien as Bartholomew.

"Bart", as he's usually referred to (sometimes to his disgust), is the AI who effectively runs the beacon's systems. Depending on who he's been working with – or who's been tinkering with his internal workings, at least – Bart is by turns sarcastic, cheery, frightened or downright suicidal, and always the most entertaining part of the series.

"Open the pod bay doors, Bart." "Eat my shorts."

EVERETT COLLECTION INC / ALAMY

Though it boasts a writing team including Zak Penn (the movie adaptation of *Ready Player One*), Glen Mazzara (*The Walking Dead*) and Ira Steven Behr (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, to which it most often bears similarities) *Beacon 23* suffers from choppy plotting, a few wooden actors and the general feeling that it might have been better served as an anthology series.

James White

ℹ Episode three has a reference to Aster winning big at Dabo, the gambling game played in Quark's bar in *Deep Space Nine*.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Deborah Harkness

How does the author of *A Discovery Of Witches* get into gear?

What is your daily writing routine like?
I don't have one! That may be disappointing for readers looking to find a suggestion for a replicable schedule formula, but it's true. I write where and when I can.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?
Music is essential to my creative process. It helps me to access a specific feeling over several days of writing, and return to it in later stages. When writing I prefer music without words. When running errands or cooking, I listen to music with words because the combination of music and poetry often sparks with the story I'm working on and lines of dialogue and scenes often fall into place.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?
Badly. In all seriousness, I see creative blockages as part of the creative process; there's nothing to do but listen to music, see new things, have new experiences and wait for the problem to unstick itself. That doesn't mean I like this aspect of writing, but it's important to accept it and be kind to yourself.

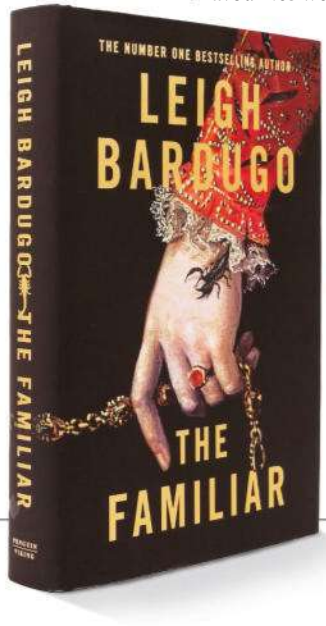
Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?
Not to my knowledge! Usually, I don't remember my dreams. Most of my good plot ideas come to me when driving the car.

> **"Music helps me to access a specific feeling over several days of writing"**

Which of your books are you most proud of?
Without question *Shadow Of Night*. It was a careful yet playful knitting together of my decades of work as a research scholar with my new passion for writing fiction. Getting the right balance between fact and fiction was challenging, and I learned so much about both the historical and writerly crafts.

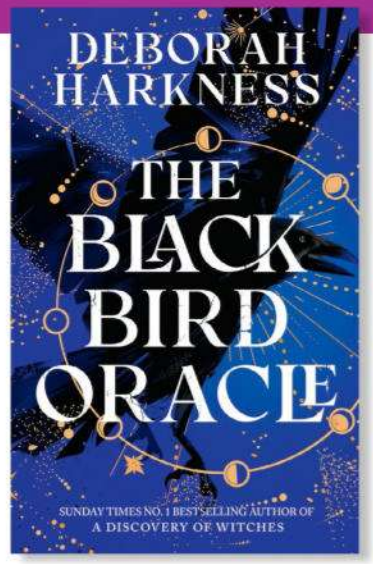
Which of your books was the most difficult to write?
The book coming out this month: *The Black Bird Oracle*. I started and stopped several times. I knew the story I wanted to tell, but it was hard to find the right way to tell it. In the end, it was simply not the proper time to tap into the characters' emotions. It was difficult not to get impatient and force the story out, but I'm so glad I kept it simmering on the back burner until it was ready.

Were you a keen reader as a child?
I was an obsessive reader. I never fitted in at school and books were my solace, providing alternative worlds to inhabit and people to get to know. My favourites were series of books like *Little Women* and its sequels, and the *Nancy Drew* mysteries.

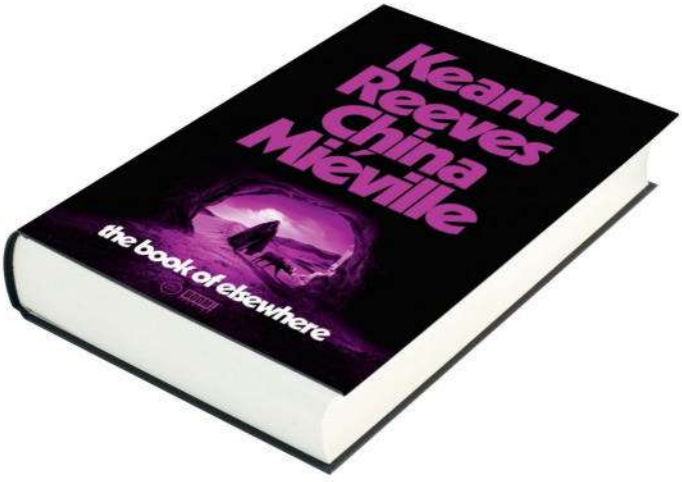


Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?
I tend to gravitate toward historical fiction that includes elements of science fiction or fantasy, and this year Leigh Bardugo's *The Familiar* stole my heart. It's set in late 16th century Spain, with magic, superstition, evil and fear playing out in both intimate settings and against the backdrop of epic events. I loved it!

What's the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?
That if you write professionally you are an avid reader. Sadly, you're too busy writing your own book to get lost in someone else's world!



The fifth novel in the All Souls series, The Black Bird Oracle by Deborah Harkness is published by Headline Books on 16 July.



THE BOOK OF ELSEWHERE

To B Or Not To B

★★★★☆

RELEASED 23 JULY

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Authors **Keanu Reeves, China Miéville**

Publisher **Del Rey**

Yes, *that* Keanu Reeves. If you've not been following comics closely then you may not be aware that the once and future Ted "Theodore" Logan has branched out into writing, launching a series titled *BRZRKR* in 2021, co-written with Matt Kindt. Now *BRZRKR* is expanding into books with this defiantly strange novel, which also acts as a surprise return for one of the giants of noughties SFF, China Miéville, with his first long-form fiction in almost a decade.

It's perhaps surprising that Miéville has chosen to return with what is, effectively, a spin-off novel, but that's to do *The Book Of Elsewhere* a disservice. Despite its links to the wider *BRZRKR*-verse, this is a standalone work and one that can be read without any prior knowledge of the comics.

Where the series was an action-packed adventure that also acted as an origin story for its hero – an immortal berzerker warrior known as "B" (and occasionally as Unute) – this mostly focuses on the present day. B has lived for thousands of years and shows no signs of stopping any time soon.

He can and does die – quite often – but he always comes back, respawning in different locations from a giant egg. Having seen and done pretty much everything a human can do, B is now trying to achieve the one thing he's never experienced: mortality.

Unfortunately, his day job is working alongside a secretive military unit and taking on horrendously violent missions for the US government. When one of these assignments goes tragically wrong, B must grapple with the arrival of another immortal who is, rather unexpectedly, a pig.

Yep, an immortal pig – an enormous, belligerent Babirusa to be precise. The two have history, but the significance of the pig's arrival is one of "a cluster of mysteries" that start to swarm around the squad.

Your first instinct with collaborative books like this is to try and figure out who wrote what. The exact nature of how Miéville and Reeves split their workload remains opaque and is, honestly, irrelevant. Certainly there are passages that feel strikingly Miéville-ian in their construction, while others have a slightly different, pulpier and more direct tone.

We'll never know for sure though, and regardless, the collaboration works well. *The Book Of Elsewhere* offers a fascinating, confusing, thrilling and sometimes a little infuriating alternative take on this universe. It remixes certain beats from the comic, but you can take it as its own weird thing.

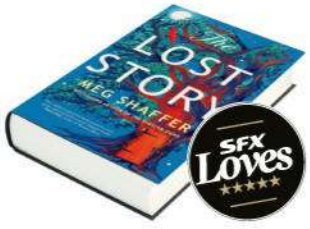
And it is *very* weird – not just when it comes to the concepts being explored (as with Miéville's previous work, a fun mix of cool

> **"It has a surprising vein of dark humour"**

new ideas and genre tropes approached in a fascinatingly oblique way), but in the way that the story is told. The plot dawdles along, going off on odd tangents about the squad members' inner lives – most compellingly when it latches onto soldier Stonier's grief at the death of his partner, accidentally killed in one of B's frequent berzerker rages – or flashing back to different chapters in B's aeons-long life.

It's always engaging, strange, and has a surprising vein of dark humour, but it's not the straightforward adventure that readers of the comic might expect. Instead, this is a cerebral tale about the blessing of mortality. B can't die, but his life seems like hell – a long trudge of "Kill. Die. Come back", as the tagline puts it. Reeves and Miéville's novel turns a (literally) comic book idea into a meditation on what it means to be truly alive that's both affecting and enigmatic. **Will Salmon**

i Next up for *BRZRKR* is a second series of comics titled *The Lost Book Of B*, which will reunite the original creative team.



THE LOST STORY

★★★★★

RELEASED 18 JULY

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Meg Shaffer**

Publisher **Arcadia**

When two teenage boys disappear in a West Virginian forest, they're presumed dead. Six months later, they suddenly return. Rafe has amnesia; Jeremy is vague about where they've been. As the mystery lingers, the boys grow apart.

Years later, Jeremy is now an expert in finding missing women. After meeting the determined Emilie, who is searching for her long-lost sister, he realises that he needs to return to the forest with Rafe. That's because he actually met Emilie's sister during his disappearance... in her role as the queen of a magical land. Surprise: the boys were in another world all along!

So far, so Narnia, with Red Crow State Forest replacing CS Lewis's dimension-hopping wardrobe as the point of entry. But *The Lost Story* isn't really about the fantasy land it conjures. No, this book's *actually* about Rafe and Jeremy's relationship, as the two men struggle with childhood trauma and their feelings for each other, compounded by Rafe's amnesia.

And damn convincing it all is, too. Everyone here feels like a real person, even when they're doing daft things such as cuddling a baby unicorn. There's a fundamental psychology at the heart of this book that is its biggest triumph. And it sits perfectly alongside its central mystery – unspooled with cheerful self-awareness and a lot of wit. **Jayne Nelson**

SMOTHERMOSS

★★★★☆

RELEASED **24 JULY**

256 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Alisa Alering**

Publisher **Titan Books**

Puberty changes everything... It's the '80s. Sheila and Angie are two sisters living in poverty in rural Appalachia. Their mother works in the local asylum and they share their small home with Thena, an obscure elderly relative full of strange stories.

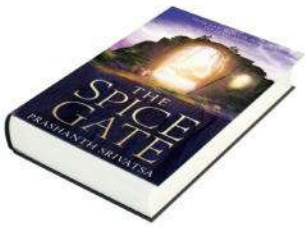
When a new girl starts at school, Sheila begins to have some very confusing feelings about her. Then two female hikers are murdered and the girls' mountainous home comes alive.

When we say "comes alive" we mean that literally. Alisa Alering's debut novel is a magic realist sort-of-thriller steeped in the atmosphere of her location: a semi-sentient environment that seems to react to the trauma of the hikers' killing.

Smothermoss features an invisible boy, whispers of a "man of stone", and ominous hand-made divination cards that really do work. Set over the course of a summer that will change Sheila's life, the book's prose is evocatively humid and blurs the lines between fantasy and reality.

While the murder subplot forms a narrative spine, it's rarely the focus. *Smothermoss* is more a dreamily fantastical coming of age novel than the horror it's being pitched as. Sheila and Angie's world is hard and dark and strange, but there's also a glimmer of hope and the sense of a better future on the horizon.

Will Salmon



THE SPICE GATE

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED **18 JULY**

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Prashanth Srivatsa**

Publisher **HarperVoyager**

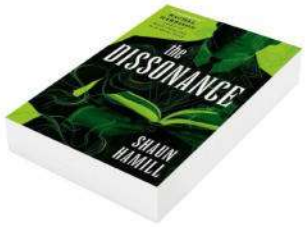
The flavours of India shape the world of Prashanth Srivatsa's debut fantasy novel. The setting is a land of eight kingdoms connected by the Spice Gates, mystical pathways that can only be traversed by those born with the Spice Mark on their skin, or with the aid of a rare substance called the Poison.

Amir is a Carrier, a member of the lowest caste in this stratified society, forced to transport spices between the realms, but when he discovers the existence of a secret ninth kingdom, his world is thrown into jeopardy.

The book starts from an intriguing premise, but the storytelling gets bogged down in clumsy exposition dumps and an excess of ideas competing for room, many of which don't join up. Despite all the lengthy worldbuilding, it's never clear why spices provide the basis for an entire economy and society. Srivatsa crams in visits to every corner of the eight kingdoms, and there's so much lore to establish that the adventure never develops any momentum.

Similarly, there's more attention paid to plot than developing engaging characters. The supporting cast lack personality, while Amir is quite devoid of charisma and too narratively passive to make his plight a compelling one. Self-involved and indecisive, he's a disappointingly dull hero.

David West



THE DISSONANCE

★★★★½

RELEASED **23 JULY**

480 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Shaun Hamill**

Publisher **Titan Books**

Structurally and stylistically, Shaun Hamill's *The Dissonance* recalls Stephen King's *It*, with its blend of magic, horror and poor life choices. The story is built around four teenagers – Athena, Hal, Erin, and Peter – who discover a magical power called Dissonance, before they reunite years later as adults to face a threat from their past.

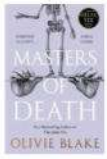
Like King and Christina Henry, Hamill is adept at capturing the nuances of life in a small town – in this case Clegg, Texas – with its dysfunctional families and unfulfilled dreams. The prose is crisp and punchy; there's never a word wasted but it's always evocative, whether capturing the oppressive humidity of a Texan summer or the terror of an encounter with the supernatural.

It's a novel of parallels; Dissonance is manipulated through writing and gesture, yet even as the teenagers become fluent in this new language, they struggle to express their feelings. Likewise, their journey from youthful idealism to adulthood is accompanied by an unsettling voyage to another world.

There's a wealth of ideas here but Hamill never lets them drag on the pace; the mechanics of Dissonance are explained sufficiently to make sense without sacrificing a sense of mystery and wonder. A tale of friendship and growing up enhanced with a thrilling frisson of fear. **David West**

REISSUES

Our pick of the latest paperbacks: **MASTERS OF DEATH** (★★★★★, out now, Tor) by Olivie Blake, author of *The Atlas Six*. Originally self-published back in 2018, it sees a



vampire estate agent, hired to sell a ghost-infested mansion, hiring a medium who turns out to be the Godson of Death. There's a lot going on here, including at least three star-crossed love stories and multiple planes of reality. We said: "A meditation on romance and mortality, with the most emotionally satisfying ending imaginable." First-time novelist Emma Törzs's **INK BLOOD SISTER SCRIBE** (★★★★½, out now, Penguin) centres on sisters Joanna and Esther,

a collection of magical books handwritten with ink made from blood, and family secrets that span centuries and continents. We said: "Though it takes a little while to get into gear, it turns into the sort of properly gripping, just-one-more-chapter thriller that keeps you reading late into the night." Another impressive debut is Sarah Hashem's **THE JASAD HEIR** (★★★★½, 18 July, Orbit). It follows a chemist's apprentice in a quiet village who's secretly the last surviving heir to a neighbouring kingdom

that was destroyed 10 years ago. When Sylvia's magic is exposed, she's forced to compete in a sort of intra-kingdom Hunger Games. We said: "The plotting is razor-sharp, the mysteries intriguing and the character development deeply satisfying."

CURSED UNDER LONDON

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
255 pages | Hardback/ebook/
Author **Gabby Hutchinson Crouch**
Publisher **Farrago**

The idea of a second, more magical city underneath London – here called Deepside – isn't particularly original, but this is a fresh if lightweight take on the concept, set in an Elizabethan England where a zombie Christopher Marlowe isn't even the strangest undead in the pub.

Unemployed actor Lazare recovers from death to discover he's not quite a vampire, but is no longer quite human either. He soon meets Fang, who's similarly afflicted; Nell, a Welsh apothecary who's happy to come along for the adventure; and Amber, a dragon runt on the lookout for a meal.

Attempts to find out just what happened to them quickly lead to a discovery that gangs are selling fae weapons on the streets of Upper London – and may be transporting something even more dangerous. Under the city they go...

This is a book filled with imagination, from the magical swans and ravens that make up the Royal Guards to the geopolitical changes supernatural beings have brought to the world. The central mystery and its resolution are intriguingly clever, and there's a strong sense of found family.

It's all a bit slight, though, with little to surprise you and not enough depth to the characters, along with a ending that's a bit too well flagged to truly engage. **Rhian Drinkwater**

SFX Loves ★★★★★

THE BRIGHT SWORD

Magic, mystery and modernity

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
688 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Lev Grossman**
Publisher **Del Rey**

Old and modern meet in this thrilling new interpretation of the Arthurian mythos from Lev Grossman, author of *The Magicians*.

He situates his tale in the tumult of sixth-century Britain, where the legacies of paganism and the Roman occupation intermingle with Christianity and the arrival of the Saxons. However, against that setting, the novel draws equally upon the medieval stories about King Arthur in the form of chivalry, jousting, the Grail Quest, and later additions to the canon like Lancelot and Galahad.

The protagonist, however, is an original character: Collum, an aspiring knight who arrives in Camelot only to discover that Arthur is dead, Excalibur has been cast into the sea and the Round Table has been reduced to a handful of misfits. Together with the sorceress Nimue, Collum and the remnants of Arthur's band of heroes seek a quest to restore Britain to God's grace. But such quests have a habit of exacting a heavy price...

Grossman's decision to centre the novel on a newcomer to Camelot allows the reader to discover Arthur's kingdom alongside Collum. The character also handily embodies the novel's dual qualities of tradition and modernity. Collum longs to be a knight and undertake a grand adventure, but he's beset by imposter syndrome.

Similarly, the surviving knights possess a distinctly contemporary edge, with their numbers including members who are respectively gay, trans and Muslim. Grossman doesn't belabour the point; the knights are multifaceted, not defined by single traits, and their histories are explored in often lengthy flashbacks that add considerable colour and depth to the world.

Grossman doesn't hurry the pace, but the skillful plotting and vivid imagery make this an experience to savour. Pagan magic is wild and untamed, while God is remote, mysterious and cruel in an Old Testament manner. It's a boldly ambitious take on Arthurian lore, but the author rises to the challenge.

David West

i Grossman's space opera *The Heavens* – devised as a Prime Video show – will now be debuting in 2027 as graphic novels.

THESE DEATHLESS SHORES

★★½☆☆

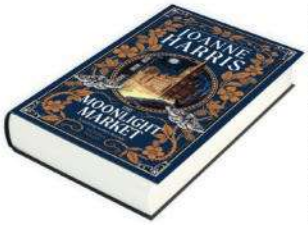
RELEASED OUT NOW!
480 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **PH Low**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

Disney might have depicted Peter Pan as a happy-go-lucky scamp, but anyone paying attention to JM Barrie's source material will have spotted that he's actually not a very nice chap. Exploring this idea, *These Deathless Shores* delves into the rampant sexism at the heart of this beloved tale.

As children, Jordan and Baron were taken to Peter Pan's elusive Island and lived lives of joy (and occasional violent terror) until puberty hit – harder, for Jordan, because her first period prompted a murderous rage among the Lost Boys. Years later, in the outside world, Jordan is still struggling to recover from the Island's addictive magical Dust. Another visit is clearly called for... heralding a war between adults and children.

And it's a gruesome one. Author PH Low is determined to be as gritty and realistic as possible with their debut, allowing blood, urine, faeces and vomit to stain these pages. Eating disorders, cannibalism and PTSD all feature.

Sure, this chaotic, blood-soaked world is intriguing; the glimpses we get of Peter and Tink, who aren't central, are fascinating. But there are many moments in which you wonder why you're spending so much time with people who are traumatised, miserable and covered in piss. This is less a dark fairy tale, more flat-out torture porn. **Jayne Nelson**



THE MOONLIGHT MARKET

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
288 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Joanne Harris**
Publisher **Gollancz**

In Joanne Harris's latest, she spins a story of moths and butterflies, love and war, memories and photographs.

Tom lives a simple life, running a photography shop and wandering the streets of London with his film camera – until the day he meets Vanessa and falls head over heels in love.

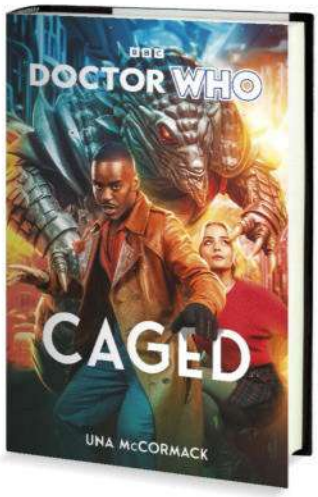
Another encounter with a strange man, Spider, leads him to the Moonlight Market, where the price of everything is a memory you'll lose forever. While he continues to pursue Vanessa, he discovers more of the world of Daylight Folk and Midnight Folk, two tribes long at war and unconcerned with the humans they harm along the way.

There's much here that's promising – especially the slow revelations of Tom's interactions with the Market – but it never quite gels.

Tom's adoration of Vanessa, obviously the result of a glamour, is as frustrating for the reader as it is for his companions, as he constantly thwarts any attempts at progress merely to speak to her again, convinced that they will make it work.

With memories snatched along the way, everything feels surface level, and it's difficult to truly care about any of the characters, despite the intriguing worlds they inhabit.

Rhian Drinkwater



DOCTOR WHO

From the ice to Ix

RELEASED OUT NOW!
201 pages/190 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Authors **Georgia Cook, Una McCormack**
Publisher **BBC Books**

Need some Fifteenth Doctor content to tide you over until the Christmas special? These two original novels should do the trick.

Georgia Cook's **Ruby Red** ★★★☆☆ sees the Doctor and Ruby landing on the frozen Lake Peipus (between modern-day Estonia and Russia) in 1242, shortly before the armies of the Novgorod Republic and the Livonian Order clash.

There they meet a 16-year-old alien from a warrior people, dropped there as an initiation rite. But Ranavere would rather be an inventor, and has set up distress signals. They've not only drawn the attention of the TARDIS, but a squid-like being which can control people via bee-sized squidlets.

There's thematic unity here: "You should have the freedom to be yourself" is the Pixar movie-esque message. A worthy one, of course, but a truism. Our main grouse is that the historical setting is just a flat backdrop. Barring Prince Alexander (who we don't get to know), only one soldier is even dignified with a name.

"What if an alien race were abducting *another* alien race" is the high-concept of Una McCormack's **Caged** ★★★½☆, which is chiefly notable for how imaginatively offbeat said races are. There's Chirracharr's people: cheerily innocent giant guinea pigs (think the Meep, before they were warped by a psychedelic sun).

Then there are the observing Ixites – octopoid creatures whose shifting colours reflect their emotions, like a mood ring. Oh, and some robotic armadillos. We'd love to see all of them on-screen.

The book has a faintly Douglas Adams-ian plot – though not his prose style. There's a political tinge too, thanks to protestors with "Ix for the Ixites" signs, but barring this faction, most of the characters are incredibly *nice*. The Doctor and Ruby's subsequent cooing almost hits "Space Babies" levels. It's a sweet tale, but some readers may find it a bit too sugary.

In case you are wondering: there's no sign of a 13th century soldier or a giant guinea pig bearing an uncanny resemblance to *Brookside*'s Rosie Banks. They missed a trick there... **Calvin Baxter**

i The next original Fifteenth Doctor novel is *Eden Rebellion* by Abi Falase. Set on a crystalline planet, it's due on 14 November.

ALSO OUT

As ever, there are plenty more books we couldn't squeeze in. A worker in a Missouri meatpacking facility, and her struggle with miscarriages, is the focus of Elle Nash's bleak, visceral body horror **DELIVER ME** (out now, Verve). Brace yourself for animal cruelty (and worse). Sarah Beth Durst's **THE SPELLSHOP** (11 July) couldn't be more different: this cosy fantasy romcom centres on a librarian who, after fleeing from a revolution, goes into the business of selling spells to ordinary folk – despite this being a crime punishable by death. Loosely inspired by the myth of Persephone, OO Sangoyomi's **MASQUERADE** (out now, Solaris) is set in an alternate 15th century West Africa, and follows Òdòdó, a woman kidnapped by a warrior king, who forces her to be his wife. In literary horror **MONSTRILIO** (out now, Dead Ink), a grieving mother in Mexico City cuts out a piece of her dead son's lung, and nurtures it until it gains sentience. It's probaby a metaphor or something. Director Neil Jordan's memoir **AMNESIA** (out now, Head Of Zeus) has a poetical turn of phrase, but also a decent amount of hard facts on films such as *The Company Of Wolves* (nine pages) and *Interview With The Vampire* (14 pages). Finally, the format of **I, TARDIS** (11 July, BBC Books) may remind our more elderly readers of *Doctor Who Monthly*'s TARDIS Log. Like that regular feature, it details the TARDIS's journeys in order – here presented as the ship's memoirs, with reflections on each Doctor and their companions. Like most "fictional biographies", it all seems a tad unnecessary.

First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

Sons Of Darkness

by Gourav Mohanty

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON MEETS SUCCESSION IN AN EPIC REIMAGINING OF THE MAHABHARATA

"Easily one of the best epic fantasy debuts of the last decade" – *Fantasy Book Critic.*

A blood-spattered prologue sets the scene for India's first grimdark fantasy novel.

The stench of split flesh from the carcasses of the Children of Light wafted out to mock his hunger. The wolves had come, and then left without feeding. Ravens circled overhead, yet none descended. These details remained with the rider as he drew rein at the very spot where his foes had made their last stand. With his dagger he flicked the strands of his long hair, clumped with dried blood, away from his eyes. As he took in the sights of the carnage that had taken place mere hours ago, he absent-mindedly rubbed a luminescent powder onto his blade.

For a Hero of Light, he reckoned he cast a rather grim shadow. Hero. The word slithered nastily in his mind. An honour bestowed upon you when you had killed all those who would have called you a mass murderer.

"Shall we, Muchuk?" Asha walked her horse amidst the sprawled bodies to where he sat astride his stallion. "Time to deliver the good news."

Ah yes. Trisiras is dead. He nudged his mount onto the slope of the hill, urging it into a collected canter as his sister followed suit. They made their way up the tortuous track towards the mountain fortress of Svarg – a great hulking fastness that loomed like a crystal-white orb against the dark, poisoned heavens. A faint pillar of light that rose from somewhere within the fortress served as their lodestar. The beacon of tyranny, Muchuk mused.

"You seem awfully quiet for someone who has won a war." Two sharp eyes stared out from Asha's beaky, grimy face packed in a half-helm. Under her armour, her hunched muscular shoulders looked all the more ungainly without a bosom to balance her form. It was a miracle she did not slide off her horse.

Muchuk shrugged, turning to stare up at the sky. By now, the third moon was a jade monstrosity. Green light leaked out from it to the west, staining the heavens with stolen emerald hues. Won a war... He sighed, as if it were a great revelation. As if he had not spent years of his life severing, slashing and slitting the Danavas, the Children of Darkness.

But Asha was right. He should have felt victorious, elated even. And yet, despite his valiant efforts, he felt like a man who had finally opened the box of glory to find that it did not contain what was etched on the lid.

They rode past their Men who were busy cutting the heads off dead Daevas, the Children of Light – the few righteous ones who had aligned with the Danavas. Their luminescent white heads made for macabre lamps, if you were into that sort of a thing. It would have been beautiful had it not been for the stench. Perhaps this was why he preferred slaying the Children of Darkness. They immaterialised into the air in a puff of odourless smoke when they fell. No stink. No bodies to toss. Clean, gutter-friendly kills.

"Muchuk Und?" Asha persisted.

"Yes, yes, victory!" he answered dryly, half wishing he could race his stallion ahead and leave her promptings far behind. "Tired of this place yet?" he asked in a pitiable attempt to change the topic of conversation.

Fortunately, Asha took the bait. "I don't know... this world has been growing on me. Battles and wine aplenty. So many wonders to behold and cherish— Will you stop rubbing that powder on the dagger, you miser?! Now that we know how to make it, we can create it any time and drown in it." A pleasant thought, all things considered. Muchuk Und sheathed the dagger. "Now where was I?

"Yes. Hm... I like this place. Not to forget," her face split into a wide grin, "the Daevas are especially ravenous in bed."

"Just what a brother wants to hear," Muchuk Und sighed. She lifted her half-helm, treating the world to her scarred face and long hair. The beaky nose did no favours for her flat face. She might have got their mother's lush tresses in a cold bargain, but she looked every bit their father's daughter. Men disappeared from her path. Soldiers obeyed her commands without question. Bards shuddered to sing in her

> **"By now, the third moon was a jade monstrosity. Green light leaked out from it to the west"**

The Author

Gourav Mohanty was born, and currently lives, in Bhubaneswar, the City of Temples. A connoisseur of mythologies and momos, he's been certified as a nerd ever since he graduated as a gold medallist from law school. He keeps things interesting by daylighting as a lawyer, moonlighting as a stand-up comic and gaslighting as a storyteller. *Sons Of Darkness* is his first novel.

presence. Envy filled Muchuk's heart. Was there any warrior as fortunate as a truly ugly one? And Asha was as ugly as rain on a wedding day.

"On the other hand," she continued as if Muchuk hadn't spoken, "I do wish we could've taught those Nagas a cold lesson in manners. To usher in the Age of Man. And I'm sure you yearn for your wretched family too."

Family. How long had it been since he saw their ungrateful faces? Now that he began to count the years, Muchuk Und could not believe he had been away from his world for a decade. Guess time passes swiftly when most of it is spent on battlefields.

"Hopefully less than they crave for me," he murmured, though he had his doubts. His daughter must be what, eleven summers by now? Would she even remember she had a father? He pushed away the dark thoughts before he tumbled down into the pit of melancholy again. "But I doubt your imperial interests will be as entertaining as we had imagined them to be, Asha. With the weapons we will carry back from here, it will be... too easy."

"Exactly!" Her face twisted with distaste. "Where is the joy in that? Home will just be... disappointing."

Muchuk sighed loudly. "But what is left to be done here?" Asha turned to him again, her eyes quizzical as she studied him. "Ah, I see now. You suffer the staleness a man feels when he has achieved everything, Brother. The Daevic indifference has infected you. It will pass. You are too cocky to be crabby for long." I hope so. Because, like a homing pigeon pining for its humble cage, Muchuk Und was homesick.

They swung down from their horses. Seeing Asha's clumsy dismount, Muchuk gave emitted another profound sigh. For one who claimed to love riding, she was quite an embarrassment to the family name.

"Ready?" he asked caustically.

"Aye, aye. Stop fretting!" she said as she finally managed to disentangle herself.

Jerking their sword belts straight, they strode towards the palace. The red doors yawned open, as welcoming as a burning pyre. Inside, grim-faced Daeva guards spoiled the mood under every archway they passed under.

"I swear this palace is just ghastly." Asha sniggered as they finally reached the inner sanctum.

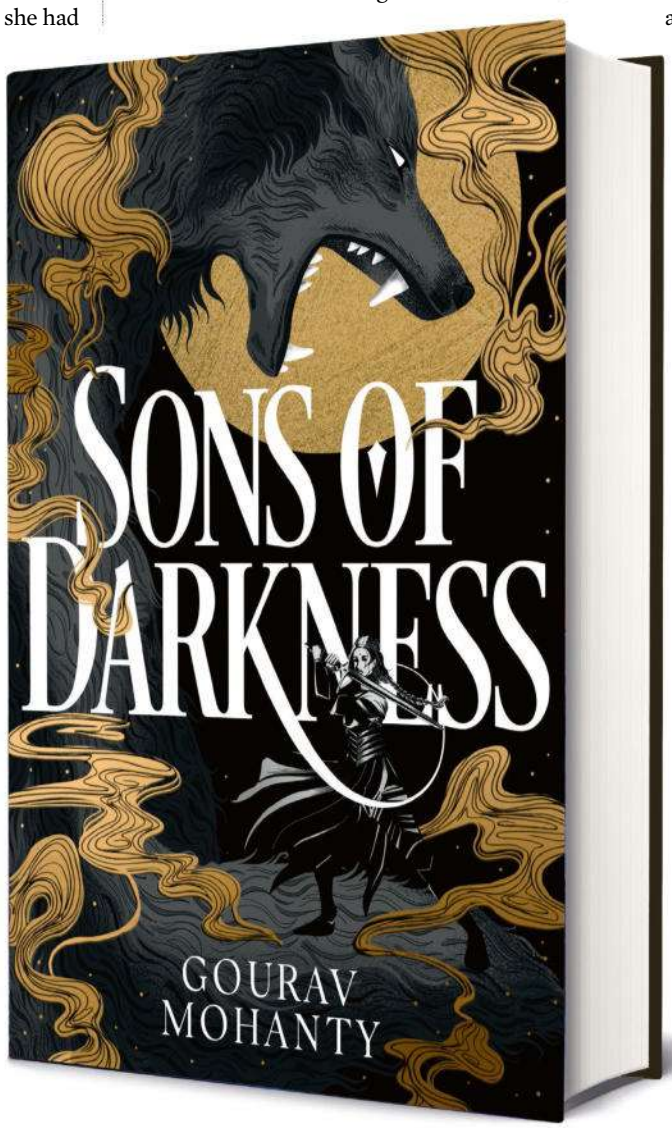
It felt like they had crossed over into a different realm. Playful fountains threw pink spray at them. Closely scythed grass spread below their feet. Hedges, carved into wondrous monsters, stood like a guarding legion on either side of the grassy pathway that led to the Dome.

The Daevas were a strange race, Muchuk reflected. In his time here, he had realised that the Daevas had ceased to procreate; had, in fact, stopped living. Immortality was their curse. They merely continued to... exist. Passion had been extinguished from their beings, along with passion, bloodlust, gluttony and envy – all the things that made life delicious. If they were indeed Gods, then the Gods were really bored. And yet, they were obsessed with something as dull as gardening. Just one of the many ironies of his employers he had unravelled over time.

The other irony he had uncovered was about why the Daevas once swooped down to his world to seduce earthlings when the Daevas themselves were such exquisite creatures. Turned out, Mortals excited and enflamed them, gave them reason to feel again. A fact he had unfortunately come to learn from his sister's accounts of Daevic endurance.

There was also the whole thing about sacrificial worship, which the Mortals had once practised to revere the Daevas when they had not known any better. Muchuk didn't quite understand how, but these ornate rituals fed the Daevas. Not with food but with... vitality, a currency in which the Daevas were most impoverished. Not that it mattered any longer for this was ancient history. All of it had happened a long time ago, much before Muchuk's time, before the Daevas had been banished from his world after being defeated in the War of Spring.

Come to think of it, no one really won that war, Muchuk reflected. The Daevas, though beaten, survived, and were gone. As for the Mortals, a hundred races became extinct overnight, and along with them the one thing that had helped them win that war. Elementals. To think he was going to be the one to bring it back to his world...



Read more in Sons Of Darkness by Gourav Mohanty, out in paperback now. The sequel, Dance Of Shadows, releases February 2025.

DEADPOOL

Family matters

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Cody Ziglar**
Artist **Rogê Antônio**

ISSUES 1-3 **With *Deadpool & Wolverine*** hitting cinemas soon – and increasingly seeming like the MCU's best hope for reigniting some of the old buzz – it's no surprise to see Marvel giving its core Deadpool book an overhaul. Relaunched with a new issue one and an all-new creative team in writer Cody Ziglar and artist Rogê Antônio, this is a solidly assured, gleefully glib and fast-paced return for the Merc with a Mouth.

While this is very much a jumping-on point for new readers, the series picks up pretty much where the previous creative team of Alyssa Wong, Luigi Zagaria and Matt Milla left off. Deadpool – aka Wade Wilson – has broken up with his partner Valentine Vuong and now needs to find a new path in life to support himself, his human daughter Ellie (who has also developed a healing factor), and his symbiote pet/sort-of-daughter Princess (think Clifford the Big Red Dog with tentacles).

To do so he decides to set up a new mercenary agency taking on jobs big and small, allying himself – at least temporarily – with Taskmaster (no, not Greg Davies). Meanwhile, a new foe known as Death Grip has mysterious and likely lethal plans for Deadpool.

Ziglar's scripting is assured and witty, delivering a couple of big laughs per issue alongside plentiful goon beheadings and meta quips. Wade's growing relationship with Ellie (and to a certain degree Princess) looks like it's going to be the throughline of this run, and it largely manages to feel meaningful without crossing over into schmaltz or getting in the way of the jokes, while Taskmaster makes a fine foil for Wade's BS.

Likewise Antônio's art is slick and accessible, the action sequences exciting, bold and impactful thanks to clean layouts and Guru-eFX's punchy colours. It's a solid example of modern mainstream superhero comics.

That's not meant to sound like damning with faint praise, but there is a sense of the creative team playing things a little safe. This take on Deadpool is a bit naughty rather than truly scabrous and irreverent, and there are only so many times per issue you can see him stab a guy and make a quip about how this is just a comic without it feeling a bit repetitive.

It's a fun, slick superhero adventure with some laughs, but *Deadpool* at its peak has traditionally been more subversive than that.

Will Salmon

i Cody Ziglar appears briefly in the season finale of *She-Hulk: Attorney At Law*, when she visits the show's writers' room.

DID WE DO GOOD, PAPA?
ABSOLUTELY! LOOKS LIKE YOU AND I ARE OFFICIALLY LIQUID ENOUGH TO AFFORD RENT ON A LOW-TIER OFFICE BUILDING IN A BAD NEIGHBORHOOD!
TOSS
Deadpool has always been a bit of a tosser, after all.

REDCOAT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer **Geoff Johns**
Artist **Bryan Hitch**

ISSUES 1-3 **Veteran DC comics** writer Geoff Johns is creating his own shared universe at Image Comics, and the latest title to join the ranks of "The Unnamed" – his offbeat squad of new characters – is certainly an attention-grabbing one.

Redcoat follows Simon Pure, a self-interested British soldier in the American War of Independence who stumbles into becoming immortal thanks to the occult dabblings of the USA's Founding Fathers. These first three issues chart his misadventures over a century later, as he's dragged back into the weirder side of American history by a 12-year-old Albert Einstein.

The series pushes in ever-goofier directions as it weaves together real history, occult conspiracies and wild action. It also has a major advantage in the form of artist Bryan Hitch, who showcases his usual energetic craft and storytelling, balancing spectacular double-page spreads with gorgeously realised historical detail.

Johns tries to match this by keeping the pace up and throwing in plenty of concepts and gags, but he isn't a natural fit for writing a deeply flawed protagonist like Pure, and some of the comedy falls flat. The "America's Secret History" angle is also a little creaky at times, but while *Redcoat* is undoubtedly uneven, it's still an energetic burst of lurid nonsense that's carried along by its fantastic visuals. **Saxon Bullock**

HELEN OF WYNDHORN

SFX Loves

★★★★★

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Dark Horse Comics**
- Writer **Tom King**
- Artist **Bilquis Evely**

ISSUES 1-3 **After achieving** success (and an upcoming DC movie adaptation) with their recent *Supergirl* miniseries, writer Tom King and artist Bilquis Evely have re-teamed for a new six-issue tale that's melding gothic mystery with vintage pulp fantasy.

Set in the '30s, it's the story of Helen Cole, the alcoholic daughter of a recently deceased pulp adventure writer. Summoned by her grandfather back to Wyndhorn House, his sprawling country estate, she starts to discover that the lurid sword and sorcery stories her dad wrote may have been based on true events.

Pitched by King as a mix of *Conan The Barbarian* and *The Wizard Of Oz*, this lush, slow-burning but thoroughly gripping fantasy is already conjuring up the kind of lyrical atmosphere that's rarely been achieved since Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*. These first three issues play with ambiguity and potentially unreliable narrators in fascinating ways, and the messed-up Helen makes for a compelling protagonist as she tries to unravel the mysteries around her.

At the same time, Bilquis Evely provides page after page of stunning visuals, once again proving herself one of the most talented comic artists around. The resulting feast for the eyes pushes *Helen Of Wyndhorn* from intriguing mystery to an absolute must-read. **Saxon Bullock**

It's sad when henchman do their own sound effects.

BATMAN: DARK AGE

I Was A Teenage Caped Crusader

★★½☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **DC Black Label**
- Writer **Mark Russell**
- Artist **Mike Allred**

ISSUES 1-3 **One of the biggest** problems with the 2022 Superman miniseries *Space Age* was the way it got distracted by a Batman-related subplot, so it's probably sensible for *Space Age*'s creative team Mark Russell and Mike Allred to focus on the Dark Knight for their six-issue follow-up.

Batman: Dark Age tries to pull a similar trick to its predecessor by starting in 1957 and tracking the main character across the decades that follow, while also portraying the real political issues of the time. In these first three chapters, we get a version of Bruce Wayne who *isn't* present at his parents' death and instead grows up a privileged teenage delinquent, until a sinister conspiracy at Wayne Enterprises results in him being jailed and sent to fight in the Vietnam War.

> **"Doesn't have enough character or novelty"**

It's this that ultimately results in him returning to Gotham to become Batman, and Russell's script tries to find new subtexts in the usual mythos by making Bruce Wayne into more of an anti-establishment figure, while the corrupt Wayne Enterprises becomes the narrative's main threat. Unfortunately, *Dark Age*'s mix of gritty realism and comic-book weirdness is only occasionally successful, thanks to weak dialogue and some hilariously unsubtle storytelling.

Mike Allred's art is as eye-catching as ever, showcasing his pop-art sensibilities and pulling off some impressive imagery. However, without the clear rhythm of *Space Age*'s "one decade per issue" structure, *Dark Age* doesn't have enough character or novelty to stand out among the hundreds of other alternate takes on Batman's history. **Saxon Bullock**

i Mike Allred previously worked as a radio host; he portrayed his experiences in the 1989 graphic novel *Dead Air*.

OKAY, CUDDLES... TAKE A LOOK AT THIS CHAINSWORD... NOTICE THOSE NICE HANDSOME TEETH...
...AND IMAGINE THEM RIPPING THROUGH YOUR LITTLE TIN BODY!

DOCTOR WHO: THE RETURN OF THE DALEKS

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Panini**
- Writer **Steve Moore**
- Artists **Various**

COLLECTION **Last year the lead** strips from *Doctor Who Weekly* were in the limelight thanks to a TV take on 1980's "The Star Beast". This 145-page collection proves the backup strips are equally deserving of attention.

Compared by editor Dez Skinn to 7" single B-sides, these Doctor-free tales expanded the series' mythos by focusing on classic antagonists. Treating them as alien races rather than "monsters", writer Steve Moore found some neat spins, while taking advantage of his freedom from budgetary restrictions.

For example, we encounter Kroton, a Cyberman who's curious about emotions, while a story set before the Silurians entered hibernation shows them riding dinosaur steeds; elsewhere, Ice Warriors get into a shootout with Cybermen.

We're also introduced to the *Weekly*'s greatest original creation: "Dalek killer" Abslom Daak, a chainsaw-packing psycho with a death wish. He's poles apart from the Doctor, but that's rather refreshing.

The visuals are consistently excellent, with Steve Dillon's work in particular blessed with impressive depth, detail and drama. Demonstrating that this universe can be rich and vibrant even in the Time Lord's absence, these little gems leave us daydreaming of a Doctor-less anthology show. How about it, Russell? **Ian Berriman**

WIZARDRY: PROVING GROUNDS OF THE MAD OVERLORD

For the brave and the kobold

★★★☆☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PC**
- Also on **PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X|S, Switch**
- Publisher **Digital Eclipse**

VIDEOGAME **We're not sure** exactly what dented the sanity of Trebor, the titular mad overlord of *Wizardry*, but the merciless nature of early '80s gaming could definitely do it. Sudden enemy ambushes? Devious traps? Unannounced teleportation? These nasty surprises were standard occupational hazards when disks were floppy and games were rock hard, and *Wizardry* features all of them and more.

Wizardry: Proving Ground Of The Mad Overlord is a classic Apple II dungeon crawler, in which you lead a crew through a treacherous labyrinth to retrieve an amulet, stolen from Trebor by the evil arch-wizard Werdna. The game stands alongside *Ultima* as one of the foundational computer RPGs, and this remake comes via Digital Eclipse, a developer renowned for its skill in revitalising classic games.

The care and attention given to it is immediately evident. The newly composed soundtrack and 3D visuals elevate the presentation to modern standards, while the game's authenticity is highlighted by having the 1981 original running in the corner.

You can choose between the original dungeon designs or the revised console port versions, and a variety of optional quality of life improvements have been implemented too. These include auto-mapping, player-assigned stat changes and characters you can recruit to replace lost party members.

We'd recommend taking the help, because *Wizardry* is a mighty challenge. If you'd become demoralised when an insensitive ninja welcomes you to the second floor by skewering and instantly killing your toughest fighter, this game is not for you. However, if you value grinding through battles and take joy in venturing just a little deeper into the maze with each incursion, you can quickly become engrossed.

Every bit of progress you make feels genuinely rewarding because the game doesn't hold your hand. So if you can adapt, *Wizardry* still has the old magic. **Nick Thorpe**

i *Wizardry* co-creator Robert Woodhead later founded anime label AnimEigo, which released shows such as *Bubblegum Crisis*.

Dungeons, and dragons. But not *that* type.

DOCTOR WHO: GOTH OPERA

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **17 JULY**
- Running time **185 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **While the** majority of Big Finish's *Doctor Who* output is original material, the company has occasionally adapted stories from Virgin's long out-of-print *New* and *Missing Adventures* books. *Goth Opera*, based on Paul Cornell's Fifth Doctor novel from 1994, is a welcome return to a range that has lain dormant for the last eight years.

The Doctor, Nyssa and Tegan are on holiday in Tasmania when they're attacked by vampires, an event that leaves Nyssa bitten and transformed into a bloodsucker. As rival Time Lord Ruath (Natalie Gumede) raises a vampire army, the Doctor must race against time to find a way to save Nyssa's life and prevent the Earth from falling into an eternal night.

Goth Opera opens with an ominous narration from Rassilon (Richard Armitage) setting the stage for an epic adventure, but with an overly generous runtime of three hour-long episodes, the story drags its heels in places.

Still, the vampires are an interestingly layered bunch, with the arrival of Micah Balfour's mellifluously toned Lord Yarven upping the, ahem, stakes. There's also plenty for Nyssa actor Sarah Sutton to do – she really sells Nyssa's panic.

A strong story, and hopefully the first of many more book adaptations from Big Finish. **Will Salmon**

STAR WARS: HUNTERS

Fight Of The Hunters

★★★½☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **iOS**
- Also on **Android, Nintendo Switch**
- Publisher **Lucasfilm Games/Zynga**

VIDEOGAME **Giving popular** videogame formats a *Star Wars*-flavoured makeover is almost as old as the franchise itself, and *Hunters* goes back to that extremely lucrative well via the popular medium of the player vs player shooter.

Although nominally set in the aftermath of *Return Of The Jedi*, this free-to-play mobile game is less hung up on canon than giving players the opportunity to run around with blasters, lightsabers and a variety of melee weapons. In fact, the premise is unbelievably simple, with a selection of familiar *Star Wars* archetypes (including bounty hunters, former Imperials and a Jawa standing on another's shoulders) facing off in arenas inspired by classic locations.

Simple touchscreen controls and a handy autofire function make it easy to launch right into the action, forming fighting teams with other online players – several game modes are available, including the standard "kill the enemy more than they kill you" and a *Star Wars* spin on capture the flag.

"Progression can become frustrating"

Unfortunately – as is often the case with mobile games – progression can become frustrating as you're forced to make a choice: make like Yoda and exercise patience, or spend more of your Earth money to unlock additional characters and functionality more quickly. That said, you do get the chance to try out new warriors before buying. There are better, more varied games of this type available, but thanks to its sense of fun and obvious love for the saga, *Hunters* is a decent opportunity to get some old school *Star Wars* magic in your pocket. **Richard Edwards**

"Insert 10p to continue. Well actually, £10."

i The *Hunters* line-up includes J-3DI, a droid that believes it's a Jedi and shouts "May the centrifugal force be with you".

THE SPECIALIST

A Very Peculiar Practice

★★★☆☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Running time **140 minutes**
- Directors **John Norton, Fay Lomas**
- Broadcaster **Radio 4 (now streaming on BBC Sounds)**

AUDIO DRAMA **The latest entry** in drama strand *Limelight*, this five-parter is the brainchild of writer Matthew Broughton, creator of award-winning conspiracy thriller *Tracks*. Like that series, it centres on a female doctor drawn into investigating a mystery with a medical basis.

Sarah Morgan plays Anna Diaz, a young GP (which makes the title a tad puzzling...) who's relocated from an urban practice to Bly, a remote Welsh village. There she finds a climate of secrecy and distrust, and some patients with truly bizarre symptoms: the first episode (spoiler ahead) climaxes with the revelation that one middle-aged man has grown sharp, antler-like horns!

Combine this with a lot of dark, doomy muttering about "forces of darkness" and "seeing things in the forest" (including "a dog with a face like a man"), and you have a series that positions itself in the territory of the supernatural.

However, as the series progresses all of this rather falls away, with chat about BP, O2 and TX coags (Broughton certainly knows his medical lingo) eclipsing hints of demonic forces as rational explanations come to the fore. Given that the series' blurb promises something "infinitely stranger" than medical science, this proves somewhat frustrating.

It also might have worked better to set the story in the past. Despite rationalisations like roads closed by flooding, the idea that Bly becomes cut off from the world, forcing Diaz to triage the village on her own (rather than turning it over to figures in hazmat suits), is hard to swallow.

Still, the mystery is intriguing while it lasts, and there's some gruesome body horror along the way (assuming you're imaginative to picture it). Morgan does solid work as the empathetic Diaz, who may sound about 15 years old but is capable of injecting authority into her bedside manner when necessary, and the character's relationship with her brother Ged (who accompanies her on the move) is convincingly realised, full of affectionate ribbing. **Ian Berriman**

In this fantasy, patients get appointments to see a GP.

i Broughton's other credits include a radio drama about the making of 1968 horror *Witchfinder General* (bit.ly/witchradio).

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

MASKS

This issue we test your knowledge of some of the most iconic face-coverings in SF, fantasy and horror

Quizmaster ***Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor***

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 1
Who is the mask from the 2005 movie of *V For Vendetta* meant to represent?

QUESTION 2
In *The Dark Knight*, what kind of masks do the Joker's henchmen wear during the bank heist?

QUESTION 3
The mask worn by Michael Myers in the original *Halloween* was adapted from a shop-bought Halloween mask of which actor?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Name this mask-wearing *Doctor Who* villain.

QUESTION 5
In the final episode of *The Prisoner*, Number Six pulls off Number One's mask, only to reveal another mask underneath. A mask of what?

QUESTION 6
Which was the first *Friday The 13th* film in which Jason Voorhees wore a hockey mask?

QUESTION 7
Picture Hannibal Lecter's muzzle. How many bars are there covering the mouth: two, three or four?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
In which '80s horror film would you find this mask?

QUESTION 9
Which legendary figure created the mask used by Jim Carrey's character in *The Mask*?

QUESTION 10
His real name was Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta. But how was this masked hero better known?

QUESTION 11
Which masked man connects the actors Lon Chaney, Claude Rains and Herbert Lom?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
In which movie franchise would you find a mask like this?

QUESTION 13
In the original 1974 version of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, which actor played the masked killer Leatherface?

QUESTION 14
Which *Star Trek* television series has an episode titled "Masks"?

QUESTION 15
Why is wearing the titular mask from 1960's *Mask Of Satan* (aka *Black Sunday*) best avoided?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Name this mask-wearing *Doctor Who* villain.

QUESTION 17
In *The Dark Knight Rises*, what is the main function of Bane's mask?

QUESTION 18
In *Brazil*, which actor donned a creepy baby mask for the scene where hero Sam Lowry is interrogated?

QUESTION 19
Describe *Death Race 2000* competitor Frankenstein's mask. (We're after colour/material.)

QUESTION 20
In the Japanese film *Onibaba*, what notable thing happens to a Noh theatre demon mask?

Answers

1 Guy Fawkes 2 Clown masks 3 William Shatner 4 Omega 5 An ape 6 *Friday The 13th Part III* 7 Three 8 *Demons* 9 Loki 10 El Santo 11 The Phantom of the Opera 12 *Harry Potter* 13 Gunnar Hansen 14 *The Next Generation* 15 It has spikes inside 16 Sharaz Jek 17 Pain relief 18 Michael Palin 19 Black leather 20 It sticks to a woman's face

How did you do?

Rate yourself by mask type

0-5
Back of a cereal packet

6-10
Papier-mâché

11-15
Shop-bought Halloween mask

16-19
Antique tribal mask

20
Solid gold relic

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SFX

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"There's actual tongues? Before the watershed?"

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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ALIEN: ROMULUS
CELEBRATE 45 YEARS OF XENOMORPHS

BATMAN: CAPED CRUSADER
A NEW ERA OF ANIMATION

SFX 382 ON SALE 7 AUGUST

THE LORD OF THE RINGS
THE RINGS OF POWER RETURN

BEETLEJUICE BEETLEJUICE
THE GHOST WITH THE MOST

PLUS! DOCTOR WHO! STAR TREK! KAOS!

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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Batman & Robin

Darren Scott, Editor

Make no mistake, *Batman Returns* is the best Batman movie – and my personal favourite film *ever* – but it's about time we gave the fourth instalment another chance. Yes, I'm talking about *Batman & Robin*.

It's come back into focus recently due to comparisons to *Madame Web* and, inevitably, *Catwoman*, but I've always held it in great affection. I'd been a Batfan since childhood, but for some reason by the time this particular film came around I was fully whipped into a frenzy by the live-action movies. I had the posters, the toys – heck, I even had a spandex Batgirl T-shirt from the Warner Bros Studio Store.

Ah, the metabolism of youth. Such was the power these films had over me, they even managed to make me like songs by U2 and The Smashing Pumpkins. It makes sense to me personally, so many years later, given how ridiculously camp the film is. Subtle, it ain't – this is a great big unapologetically gay opus from Joel Schumacher.

Reports say it was being played as "a cartoon" by the director, which didn't go down well with certain members of the production. Chris O'Donnell would later say he felt like he was "shooting a toy commercial". Other members of the cast, however, seemed to get right into this direction; Arnold Schwarzenegger not only froze as much scenery as he could playing Mr Freeze, he gave it all a bloody good gnaw too.

Uma Thurman is an absolute *joy* as Poison Ivy, clearly relishing being told to go bigger in her first real blockbuster. Bat-nipples, Bat bank-cards, Batgirl... It's not hard to draw comparisons to the '60s TV series – just look at the campy version of Bane, for goodness sake – nor is that a bad thing. It just wasn't something that people necessarily wanted at the time, perhaps. Some may argue that's still the case, but I live in hope that there's an extended version in the vaults somewhere, like the *Batman Forever* one that's recently been unearthed.

Separate the original Tim Burton movies from the Schumacher ones if that helps, but *Batman & Robin* does exactly what it says on the tin – it was just ahead of its time.

As Darren told Lady Freeze when he pulled her plug: this is a one-woman show!

Fact Attack!

- **Adding nipples to the outfits was costume designer Jose Fernandez's decision, "informed by Roman armour, like Centurions".**
- **Arnold Schwarzenegger was paid $25 million to play Mr Freeze – at the time, the biggest ever salary for a movie star.**
- ***Batman & Robin* was to be the last Batman movie for eight years. Warner Bros cancelled all projects, including *Batman Unchained*.**
- **The Scarecrow and Harley Quinn were set to appear in *Unchained*, which would have been darker and more similar in tone to the Burton movies.**
- **Chris O'Donnell revealed in 2012 that a Robin spin-off film had also been planned, but was abandoned following *Batman & Robin*.**

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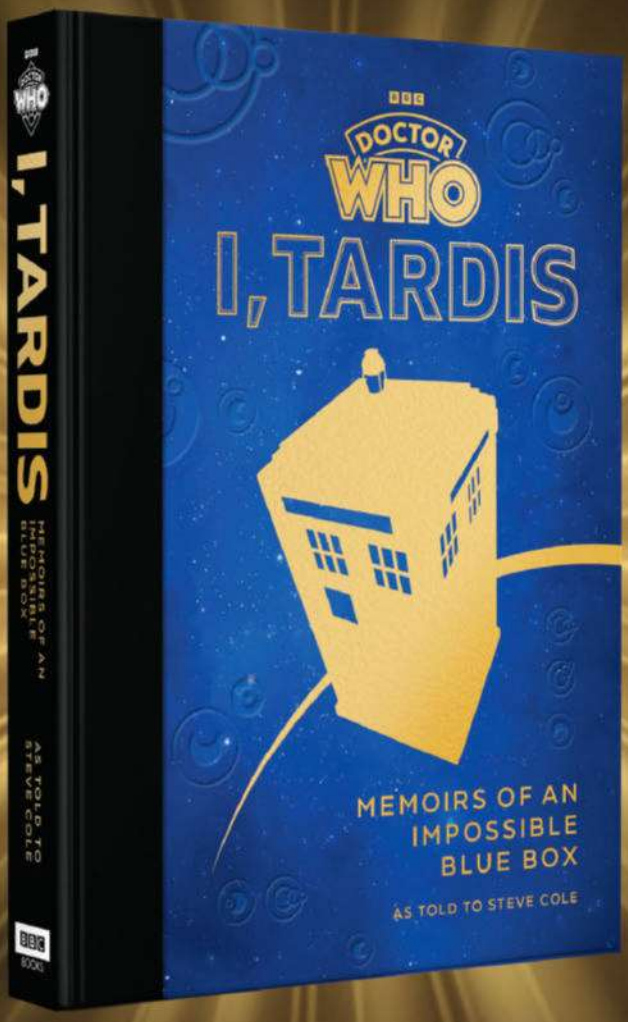
I, TARDIS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SCAN ME

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